Marxism Today

heoretical and Discussion Journal of the Communist Party July 1976 30 pence

Editorial Comments

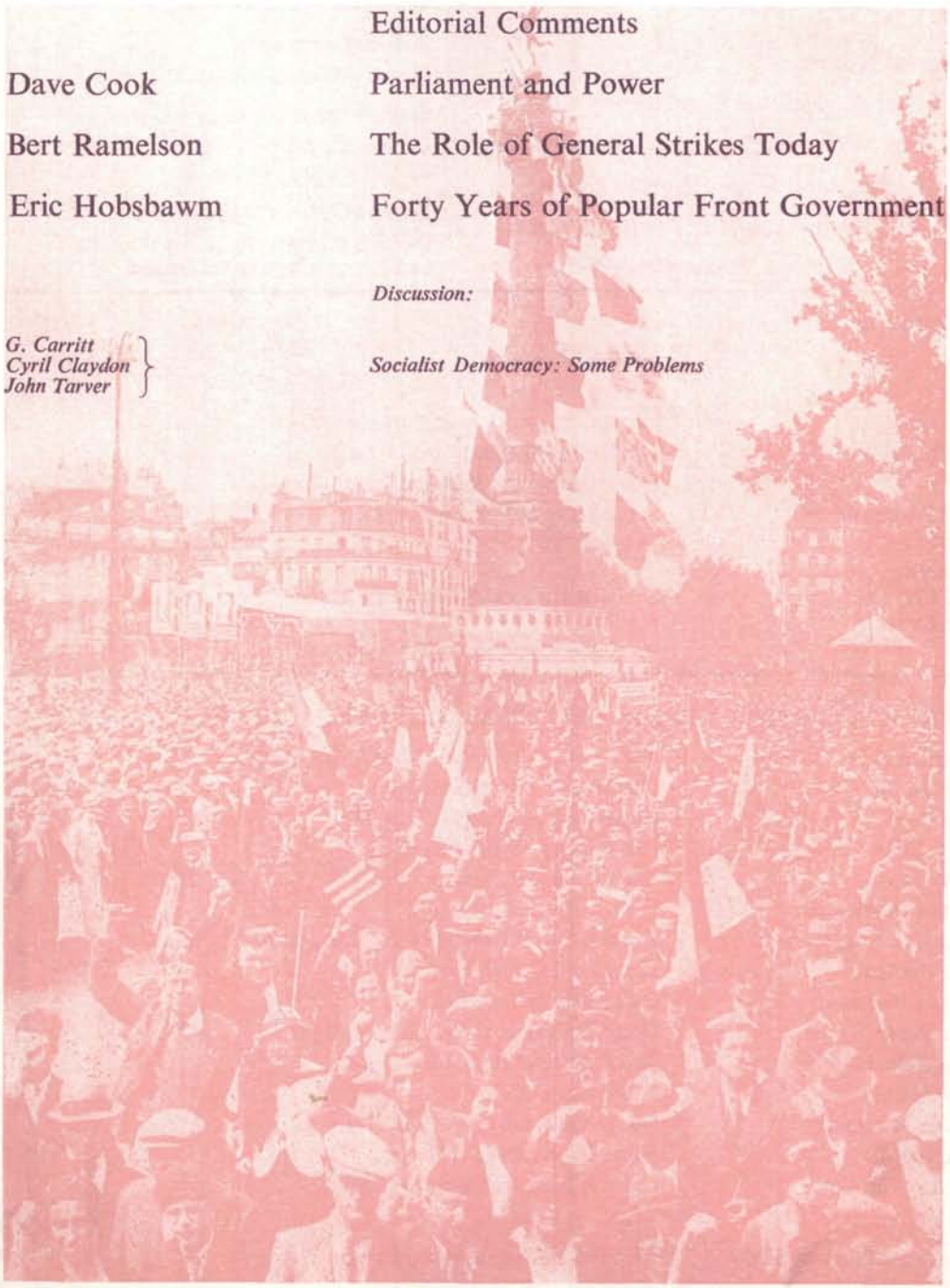
Dave Cook — Parliament and Power

Bert Ramelson — The Role of General Strikes Today

Eric Hobsbawm — Forty Years of Popular Front Government

Discussion:

G. Carritt, Cyril Claydon, John Tarver — *Socialist Democracy: Some Problems*



People's Front Demonstration, Paris, July 1936

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Marxism Today

Theoretical and Discussion Journal of the Communist Party

Volume 20, Number 7

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The front cover was designed by Pat Cook

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Editorial Comments

WELCOME TO CUL 8

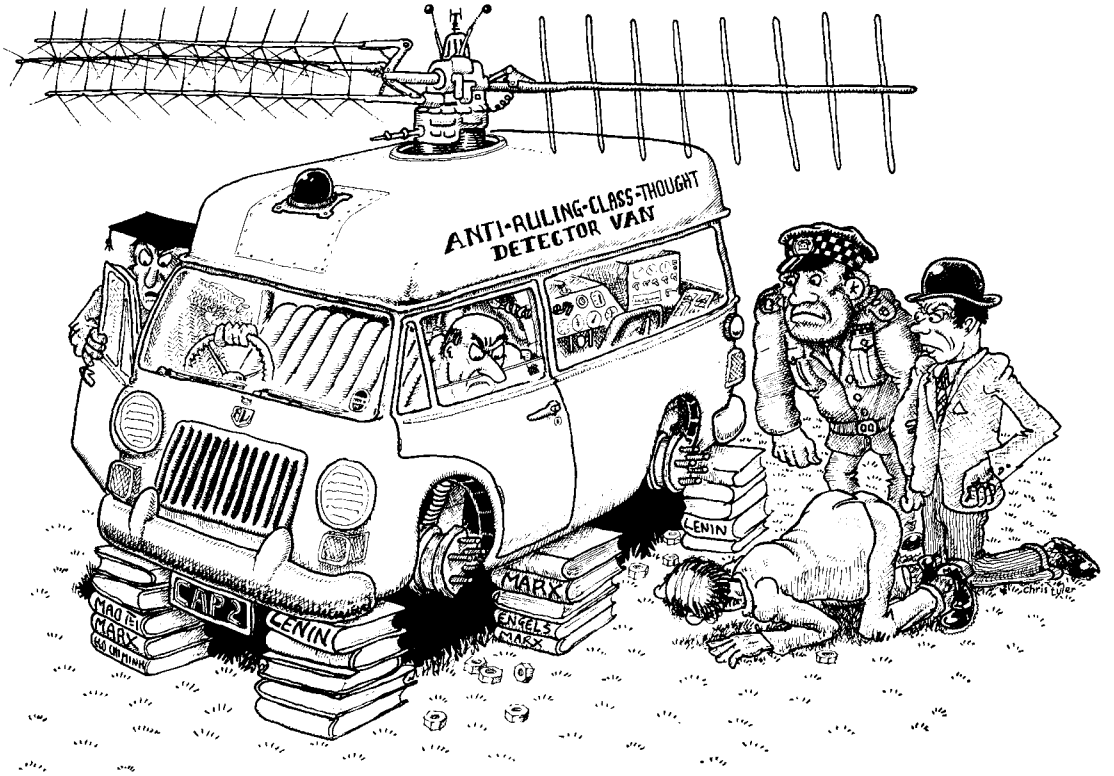
WITH an attendance of around 100 the first Community University of London was held in 1969. Year by year from CUL 1 to CUL 5 the numbers increased to some 300. In 1974 a major rise took the total participation to 630, and 737 attended CUL 7 last year.

This advance of CUL reflected both an extending interest in Marxism-Leninism and a growing capacity to organise courses and discussion with an informed, critical approach and the most open discussion.

As numbers year by year increased, so did the range of courses offered, the variety and richness of content. This year at CUL 8 there will be new specialist courses in economics and science as well as new general courses, and an extended range of interdisciplinary items—in all 10 general courses, 12 interdisciplinary and 17 specialist courses.

One course will be devoted to the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, another to the experiences of revolution in the 20th century. Apart from general and interdisciplinary courses on the family and women and revolution, problems of women's position in society and struggle for liberation will feature in a number of the specialist courses. A number of non-communists will be amongst those leading sessions.

Amongst the cultural events a planned evening of political theatre will emphasise the involvement of the audience in creating their own theatre groups. A discussion on the media will centre on the role of the



The poster of CUL 8

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revolutionary artist whilst the Saturday social will focus on the cultural expression of the national liberation struggle.

We wish every success to CUL 8 and hope to publish in future issues of *Marxism Today* a selection of the papers discussed.

THE SPECIALIST GROUPS

During the past year this great interest in Marxism has been demonstrated by the increasing support for the activities of the specialist groups of the Communist Party, wherever efforts have been made to organise events.

Groups which have a regular organised basis now include Built Environment, Esperanto, History, Law, Literature, Music, Psychology, Philosophy, Science, Sociology, and there are many other fields where specialist groups could well exist, given the will to organise them.

Two groups which have recently broken out of the pattern of regular but small meetings are those of Literature and Sociology.

The Literature group decided to organise a Brecht week-end which included not only lectures[1] but the film *Galileo* and a theatre workshop session demonstrating some of Brecht's theatrical and acting techniques, and locating these within the overall context of Brecht's Marxist ideas. Some 150 people attended.

The group has produced the first two issues of a journal *Red Letters*, and has followed up the week-end event with a discussion opened by Arnold Kettle on Ideology. Future plans include an event on the Thirties to be organised in the autumn.

The Sociology group has had a similar experience. It organised a one-day conference on *Marxism and Sociology* and 90 attended. The group is now planning a more ambitious event in the autumn on *Class and Class Structure*.

The long-established History group has continued to meet regularly and to publish its journal *Our History*.

Currently it has been actively participating in the wide range of events commemorating the General Strike. Members of the History Group helped to prepare the book on the General Strike published by Lawrence & Wishart. The group held a discussion with Margaret Morris on the General Strike.

The next issue of *Our History* will be *The General Strike in Lanarkshire* by John McLean. The current publication is *Imperialism, the Communist Party and the British Labour Movement in the 1920's.* The group has also held a conference at Keele on *Marxism and History* and is planning in the autumn a conference on the 1920's.

The History group Newsletter has become extremely interesting[2].

The Philosophy and Psychology groups are hoping to co-operate in a discussion based on Lucien Sève's *Theory of Human Personality*, and all the other groups listed have planned a future programme and in many cases they have occasional or regular publications[3].

JAPANESE AND SPANISH COMMUNIST PARTIES ON INTERNATIONALISM

Akahata of April 1, 1976, published the welcoming speeches of Kenji Miyamoto, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan and of Tetsuzo Fuwa, Chief of the Secretariat along with that of the leader of the visiting delegation of the Communist Party of Spain—Santiago Carrillo—the Party's General Secretary[4].

In the Joint Statement of the two Parties, which it also published, there is an important section on their conception of internationalism:—

> ". . . both Parties consider that the true internationalism of our time lies in the fact that the working people in the capitalist countries, the socialist countries and the national-liberation movement, develop independently and correctly their respective struggles and establish their cooperation with the content and forms adequate to the present situation.
>
> "The development of relations among the Communist Parties of the developed capitalist countries, faced with similar situations and tasks, is in this sense of importance and of particular actuality.
>
> "It is necessary for the advance in the struggle of peoples of the world to completely recognise the diversity of the revolutionary movements in different countries and the independence of each communist party. This is a fundamental precondition for the international communist movement of our epoch.

[1] One of the papers—Nick Jacobs on *Brecht and the Emotions* was published in our June issue.

[2] The most recent issue is No. 9 of May 1976. It can be obtained from the Editor—History Group Newsletter, 16 King Street, WC2E 8HY and can be purchased by non-members of the Group.

[3] Enquiries may be made to the Secretary of each group, c/o 16 King Street, London WC2E 8HY.

[4] Bulletin of the CC of the CP of Japan—*Information for Abroad*—No. 350, May 1976.

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> "To consider as absolute the ideology defined by a particular party on its own interpretation of the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and to attack other parties because they do not accept these, or to regard their attitude towards that party as—'the touchstone of proletarian internationalism'—all leads, in fact, to the denial of the independence of communist parties. . . .
>
> "The respect for and recognition of the independence of communist parties is the only way for the international communist movement to meet contemporary demands, developing creatively the theory of scientific socialism in the complex and new conditions of present day society.
>
> "The CP of Japan and the CP of Spain consider that it is an urgent task of the international communist movement to establish, not only in words but in practice, the principles for true cohesion, such as independence, equality and non-interference in each other's internal affairs and international solidarity".

TROTSKY AND WORLD REVOLUTION

At the end of the sixties, *Cogito*, which is the theoretical and discussion journal of the Young Communist League, published an important study by Monty Johnstone on *Trotsky—His Ideas*, which dealt with such questions as Trotsky's relationship to the Bolshevik Party, his theory of "permanent revolution", his role in the October Revolution, the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the trade union controversy and the discussion on the possibility of building socialism in one country.

We are glad to inform our readers that a second part of this study has just been published in a special edition of *Cogito* under the title of *Trotsky and World Revolution*[5].

It covers the period 1923-1940, treating such problems as Germany in 1923; the British General Strike; the Chinese Revolution; Indo-China; the Struggle against Fascism in Germany 1929-33; the Popular Front in France; the Spanish War; the Second World War; the Fourth International and the Lessons of History.

Monty Johnstone approaches the whole complex problem of Trotsky's role in a critical and self-critical spirit, not trying to hide profound errors made under Stalin's leadership, nor attempting to present an international communist movement free from mistakes, which makes his critique of Trotskyism all the more convincing.

The Fourth International was founded at a secret conference in September 1938. The Transitional Programme of the Fourth International, written by Trotsky and adopted by the conference, pompously and pretentiously announced that "the crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind's culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International". The "overthrow of Mussolini, Hitler and their agents and imitators" as well as the struggle for colonial liberation would "occur only under the leadership of the Fourth International".

In fact, Monty Johnstone concludes, "Trotsky's predictions have proved . . . disastrously mistaken . . ." "the world revolution has made enormous advances in this period—but under the leadership of the Communist Parties described when the Fourth International was formed as "no longer parties, properly speaking, but mechanisms operated by the Soviet Foreign Office (whose) doom was long ago pronounced".

An extended study of "Trotsky and the Popular Front" by Monty Johnstone was published in the October and November, 1976, issues of *Marxism Today*.

We strongly recommend all these studies to our readers and look forward to the book on Trotsky on which he is working and which will be published eventually by Lawrence & Wishart.

LEFT OR ULTRA-LEFT?

The *Left in Britain* 1956-68,[6] edited by David Widgery, has the declared aim of studying the left in Britain, of reproducing "in their own words" the atmosphere, attitudes and experiences of those who participated in the political, ideological and economic struggles of 1956 and 1968 and in the years between.

In reality, it is essentially a study of the ultra-left.

Four of those quoted in the book including Edward Thompson and Bob Rowthorn, say they have now changed their positions, Thompson declaring that he is "in radical disagreement with the selection and interpretations of the recent history of the left presented in the book". And no wonder, for while Thompson might not agree with Communist "interpretations", the selection and interpretation given are thoroughly tendentious and distorted.

The Editor—David Widgery—regrets that Communist Party writers are "under-represented" on the lame excuse that *Labour*

[5] Monty Johnstone—*Trotsky and World Revolution: a Critique*, *Cogito*, May 1976, 30p.

[6] David Widgery—The Left in Britain 1956-68. Penguin Books. £4.00.

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Monthly—which has never been an official Communist Party journal—refused him permission to reprint articles.

The result is that the Communist Party features only as an object of derision, denigration and attack in extract after extract. Sedgwick and Cliff in their contributions dismiss the entire political side of the Labour Movement—the Labour Party, the Labour Left, the Communist Party, as hopeless and present the International Socialists as the sole exponents and defenders of Marxism.

Every key question discussed in the book—the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Hungary, the handling of the controversies inside the Party which developed around these events, the CND, the Vietnam Campaign, the Student Movement, the economic battles of the middle fifties and early sixties, are almost all dealt with from one standpoint only—anti-Communist and pro International Socialist.

The whole adds up to a disjointed parody of the real history of the British Left over the period covered.

SECTARIANISM

Tony Cliff, one of the founding fathers of IS, and its leading theoretician, explaining where IS differs from Trotsky says "The form of property is a bloody stupid criterion for deciding whether a State is a workers State or not . . . what the worker cares about is the relations in production. . . . The form of property doesn't appear at all to the working class as an active agent in society".

But Marx in the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* links the forms of property directly with the relations of production and speaks of conflict at a certain stage between "the material productive forces of society with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—*with the property relations* . . . (our italics)".

And the socialist movement has, from its foundation, proclaimed as its foremost aim to be the replacement of the private 'form of property' in the means of production, distribution and exchange by the social form of property.

The claim of the IS to be *the* Marxists is refuted by their mechanical un-dialectical and contradictory approaches to the Trade Unions on the one hand and the Labour Party on the other—both of them dangerous and sectarian.

For the unions, Rank and Fileism is the policy, the Rank and File being regarded as the militant, class conscious force counterposed to Trade Union leaders who are, by definition, dismissed as bureaucrats and as "betrayers".

IS dominated Rank and File organisations are, in practice, counterposed to the unions, the struggle between rank and file and the unions being made a decisive element in all economic battles.

The Labour Party 'rank and file' and 'Labour Left' are dismissed out of hand. "The Labour Party is a Capitalist Party" (Cliff p. 440). Lenin was much more cautious and rejected Cliff's simplistic generalisation. He spoke of its "quite unique composition" (its federal character and its major base in the trade unions) and singled out the leaders for his attacks.

The IS approach to both Labour Party and trade unions lacks any trace of the Marxist conception of change, contradiction, development, transformation—the struggle of opposed trends *within these organisations*—the basis for the victory of the left over the right.

Cliff sees the revolutionary party as being, in effect, the Shop Stewards' Movement wearing a political hat, "a shop stewards' movement that will have a political life of its own, and this will be the revolutionary party".

Lenin argued with those who put forward this conception of the revolutionary party way back in 1920 and convinced them of its total incorrectness.

MIXED ECONOMY

One should be grateful to Mr Callaghan for so frankly outlining his fundamental reformist ideas. "I do not believe," he said in reply to a question from Dennis Skinner in Parliament on May 4, "one can force the large private sector to invest". He continued:

> "one has to have a choice between a wholly controlled economy or one which is a mixed economy and for that part of the sector of the mixed economy which is private, you can lead a horse to the water but you cannot make it drink. Therefore you have to apply the necessary incentives which will compel it to drink.
>
> As this party has always stood for a mixed economy and not a totally controlled economy, that must be the basis on which our economic policy proceeds."

This is in fact not true. Earlier generations of reformists looked forward to a *Socialist* future, wrote of it and spoke of it. Their reformism lay in the fact that their denial of the class struggle, acceptance of the neu-

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trality of the state, call for gradual advance within the framework of the capitalist economic relations, capitalist state and capitalist-dominated media, doomed their advance to socialism to inevitable failure.

It was at a later stage, at the time of Durbin's *Politics of Democratic Socialism*, for instance, and in the Gaitskell period that "mixed economy" began to become the official right-wing *long-term* aim.

Professor G. D. H. Cole some 25 years ago had some interesting thoughts on the dilemma that faced a Labour Government propagating the aim of mixed economy:

> "success demands that two conditions shall be simultaneously satisfied—that the capitalists who are *left in possession* (our italics) shall aid and not obstruct the working of the new economic system; and that the workers shall *feel* (our italics again) it to be different enough from capitalism to be ready to serve it to the best of their power".

No easy problem! He continues:

> "In order to enlist this new group spirit on the workers' side it is necessary to stress the difference between the old economic order and the new one which the Labour Government is endeavouring to put in its place; whereas in order to enlist the co-operation of the employers who are to be left in possession, it may appear necessary to make the difference as small as it can be made to appear. This is the dilemma that confronts every Government that is attempting to make the best of a 'mixed economy' and the solution cannot be easy to find."

It was a difficult *psychological* problem Cole explained at the time.

It still is. And however successful Messrs Callaghan and Healey are in convincing those who are "left in possession" that their policy is correct, it will be more and more difficult to make those whose wages and standards are continuously cut even *feel* that this is all for the best.

There is no future for a Labour Government that sets as its task the management of capitalism.

THE BONN CONGRESS OF THE GERMAN COMMUNIST PARTY

Whether a capitalist country is the "sick man" of Europe, like Britain, or its strongest state like Western Germany, where the profits of the monopolists remain immense and the currency is the most stable of all the countries in the Common Market, the crisis is just as deep and the ruling class "cure" identical, namely to put all the burdens on to the working people.

This is borne out in the report to the Congress of the German Communist Party (DKP) delivered in Bonn on March 19 by its chairman—Herbert Mies.

His account of the economic situation and of the government measures aimed allegedly at reducing inflation and unemployment, has a familiar ring:

> "Industrial production in 1975 was 7 per cent down on 1974 and has declined almost to the level of 1971. 1,300,000 industrial and white collar workers are unemployed. . . . In addition hundreds of thousands are on short time . . . less than four-fifths of the productive capacity is in use. Last year alone products to the value of 120 thousand million marks were not produced. . . . Hundreds of thousands of people in our country have no decent housing, while at the same time 400,000 houses stand empty and some 300,000 houses which should have been built since 1974 have not been built at all because the rents are such that most people could not possibly afford to pay them.
>
> "There is unemployment amongst teachers side by side with a teacher shortage . . . the crisis has hit young people with a special severity and capitalist newspapers refer to them cynically as 'the lost generation'. . . .
>
> "Home investment has stagnated since 1970 whilst unemployment increases year by year. Regardless of the interests of the working people and of our country the monopolies increasingly invest abroad, especially in the so-called low wage countries. . . ."

The "explanations" given are the same. Inflation has been caused mainly by the increases in the prices of raw materials. Wage increases now will only mean higher prices and more unemployment. The way to end both is "austerity", wage restraint and cuts in the social services, all of which have been undertaken—without any noticeable effect on either.

Against these attacks on living standards, Herbert Mies called for an active struggle to force a "change of course, to maintain the gains won in past struggles" and declared that unemployment and inflation can be fought effectively by "an active wages policy, by increasing the purchasing power of the mass of the people, by the workers, their unions, shop stewards and works committees using all their strength to prevent sackings, the transfer of factories and factory closures" and pledged the fullest support of the Communist Party for "this correct way of doing things".

FOR AN ANTI-MONOPOLIST ALLIANCE

In face of this offensive by the big monopolies assisted by right-wing trade union leaders and the government in which the major party is the Social-Democratic Party, Herbert Mies called for unity of action of

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Communists and Socialists and for a wider "broad front of all left forces, for an anti-monopoly alliance".

This was all the more necessary in view of the ever increasing attacks on democratic rights, highlighted by the witch-hunting of Communists, Socialists, trade union militants and other progressives out of jobs in the civil service and local government (the "Berufsverbot") in flagrant violation of the Basic Constitution and the increasing danger of a "swing to the right":

> "From this Congress we confirm our readiness to collaborate with all those who have peace and detente, democracy and social progress at heart."

Explaining the attitude of the DKP to freedom and democracy he said:

> "It is our firm conviction confirmed by life itself, that freedom and democracy for the working people are linked inseparably with the elimination of capitalist property and power relations. Nevertheless, as communists we fight now with the utmost determination to see that all the elementary rights won by the working class in past decades of hard struggle are protected and extended step by step".

In view of the many questions raised about the Party's alternative socialist policy he proposed that a new draft programme be prepared for discussion by the Party.

The Bonn Congress aroused very great interest and was very widely reported in the press and on television, mostly in a hostile fashion. This is in contrast to previous congresses and testifies to the increasing weight of the DKP in West German politics. This is in turn reflected in the fact that the membership of the Party is now 42,453, that the Party gained a number of victories in recent local and municipal elections although it also suffered some set-backs, that the number of factory branches has been increased and that for the last two years it has had a daily paper *Unsere Zeit* at whose last festival in 1975 450,000 people were present.

THE FOREMAN

The traditional view of the foreman as an uncomfortable person caught insidiously between management and worker, and thus unable to find a satisfactory self-image, is carefully scrutinised and correctly overthrown by this study.[7]

In a thorough, exact but at times obscure book we are presented from the start with a statement of the theoretical approach taken. What this is, besides being at times confusing, is another attempt to provide a theory to explain social reality without reference to Marxist concepts like dialectics, class struggle, exploitation, and indeed without reference to the background of a capitalist system in the period of state monopoly capitalism.

The rest of the book details the relevant areas of interest with regard to the foreman such as: the level and type of technology; size of the organisation; ownership of the organisation; trade union membership; leadership; social background; attitudes etc. etc. All of this detailed bulk of the work is carried out with reference to a wide selection of other authors and empirical studies. The careful sifting of such information provides a useful set of summaries and insights.

But the conclusion, which does not seem to follow from the preceding analysis, does recognise that the position of foremen is in transition, and that the new look is a professional man with some qualifications at the start of a career in management. This contrasts to the still existing old model which remains that of the promoted shop floor worker unhappy in his ambiguous position and joining a trade union as protection from above and below. Although these conclusions interestingly point to the sharpening of certain tendencies within industry and the clarification of class positions, yet the preceding analysis goes nowhere near to explaining such developments as consequences of the wider tendencies of the concentration of capital; state expansion; modern management manipulation.

The concepts of class, management control, trade union struggle, monopolisation, state power and so on are treated as peripheral in this study; and yet they are central to the problem tackled.

500 YEARS OF RADICAL VERSE AND SONG

British literature is deeply enriched by the tradition—500 years old or more—of radical, later socialist, verse, satire and song.

It was in the late 18th century that the publication of political anthologies began. "Seditious" songs were sung and rebellious song sheets sold in the radical taverns (there were Whig and Tory taverns too) where the militants of the day met and drank and made protest.

Thomas Spence who from his Hive of

[7]David Dunkerley—*The Foreman: Aspects of Tasks and Structure*, RKP, £5.95.

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Liberty in Little Turnstile (Holborn) edited song sheets, designed radical tokens, and wrote his own moving poems, advised his followers "to meet and sing and sing and meet":

"A song that awakens applause
Is better than speaking or preaching".

This tradition of radical song book and anthology continued in Chartist days and then with the socialist songbooks at the end of the 19th century. Some excellent anthologies were published between the wars, but most of these are long out of print.

We should be very grateful to Mary Ashraf who has edited a new anthology of "Political Verse and Song from Britain and Ireland", published by Lawrence and Wishart[8].

Readers will certainly want to supplement and enlarge the section that covers the last few decades, but many will make exciting discoveries amongst the radical poetry and song of the past.

They will be moved by the stirring songs of Thomas Spence and Charles Morris, written at the end of the 18th century, by the anonymous "Address to the Swinish Multitude". When Burke used this term to describe the working people, the pig became, for the radicals, the people's symbol:

"Ye vile SWINISH herd, in the Sty of Taxation
What would you be after?—disturbing the Nation?
Give over your grunting—Be off—To your Sty!
Nor dare to look out, if a KING passes by:

Get ye down! down! down!—Keep ye down!

Do you know what a KING is? By Patrick I'll tell you;
He has Power in his Pocket, to buy you and sell you;
To make you all Soldiers, or keep you at work;
To hang you, and cure you for Ham or Salt Pork!"

Get ye down! etc.

And they will be stirred by the anti-war songs and verses like the (1797?) "Fate of Those Who Go For Soldier":

"When into the Village or Town,
A Recruiting the Soldiers do come;
With lies and with bullying around
They rattle away with the Drum;
When large sums of Money they promise
That they never intend for to pay
But of this my brave fellows be certain
You'll be shot at for Six-pence a day
Shot at for Six-pence a day

"Then ne'er mind the sound of the drum
Stay at home with your sweethearts and wives;
Free from harms to the Soldier that come
That lops off their limbs and their lives;
For the Captains will get all the Gold
And the Men lose their lives in the Fray;
Is not he a damned fool young or old
That is shot at for Six-pence a day?
Shot at for Six-pence a day"

The Chartist period is well represented, as are early trade union songs, anti-colonialist writings like many of the Irish items and the poetry of John Francis Adams, and the poetry and song of the early socialist movement.

MTD INDEX

The Index for Vol. XIX of "Marxism Today" (1975) is now available. and can be obtained from "Marxism Today", 16 King Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8HY. Price 5p. Please send stamped addressed envelope.

[8] Mary Ashraf (Editor)—*Political Verse and Song from Britain and Ireland*, 440 pp, Lawrence & Wishart, paperback £1.50.

completed from page 232

fail their historic destiny and fail other masses the whole world over.

The Soviet state—before, during and after 1956—has been the greatest instrument for democratisation. More people help in governing that country than any thinker ever thought possible before. Of course, the part played by the socialist state has varied in value and is changing now. Gollan admits it "is now tackling much bigger and more important problems of socialist democratic development" (p 25) although he has little to say about them.

This overwhelming disregard for the importance of the state in building socialist democracy is the worst sign of revisionism in the article and borders on parting company with what Marx and Lenin taught. If all we can contribute to the discussion of socialist democracy is our incessant harping on a bourgeois misunderstanding of individual . . . no, stunted individual . . . liberty we risk deceiving British workers about how to make socalism.

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Problems of the State:

Parliament and Power[1]

Part One—History and Procedures

Dave Cook

(*The author is National Organiser of the Communist Party*)

There is a traditional and reverential bourgeois view of Parliament which sees it as the apex of politics and power in Britain. In total opposition to this an alternative approach is perhaps best summed up in the words of the anarchist graffitti, "Guy Fawkes—the only man ever to enter Parliament with honest intentions". Like Guy Fawkes, those who hold this view usually share his desire for its destruction, although they have rather different methods in mind.

These diametrically opposed viewpoints provide the context in which these two articles look at a number of related questions.

Where stands Parliament in relation to the apparatus of state in Britain? Is it an instrument of monopoly rule? What are the possibilities of transforming it? Can a transformed Parliament play an important role in a socialist revolution? If so, how, and in what conditions?

The article is divided into two parts. The first, which is printed here, examines the way Parliament functions now. The second, in the next issue, will argue that there are openings for a transformation which the present domination of Parliament by the politics of the ruling class has been unable to close. In particular it will be concerned with the fight to defend and extend democratic rights, now increasingly under attack. Then it will look at the connection between a totally different sort of Parliamentary politics, which have yet to be won, and mass class struggle outside.

Commons and Lords

As everyone is taught at school, the first Parliament was summoned by Edward I, but as everyone is not taught at school, this ancient ancestry marks the changes in class power which have been expressed through it. Parliament has in turn been a vehicle for feudal barons, emergent bourgeoisie, great 19th-century landowners, mid-Victorian capitalists and now monopoly capitalists. Despite this much-vaunted "continuity" the bourgeois state in Britain was only established after the revolutionary struggles of the 17th century, which did not stop short of civil war, and in which Parliament played a leading role.

It is fascinating to look at the relationship of the House of Commons and the Lords, the two institutions which formally constitute "parliament"; and disentangle the strands of political conflicts and compromises inherited from preceding eras, and how they have been modified and transformed. But this would need a whole issue of *Marxism Today*. This article is concerned with the House of Commons.

Although the House of Lords and the monarchy are intimately linked to the Lower House in their constitutional functioning, neither of these institutions is pivotal for the maintenance of capitalist class rule. In other words, state monopoly capitalism could "abolish" both Monarchy and Lords and still maintain highly centralised political power in conditions of parliamentary democracy.

This does not mean that these bodies are unimportant for the ruling class. Ralph Miliband sums up the history of the Lords as "a saga of struggle against the erosion of privilege of any kind" (*The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 150). Even the apparently "powerless" monarchy possesses sufficient power to prompt Lord Blake, the constitutional historian, to state: "I do not think one can wholly exclude the possibility of a crisis in which royal discretion might have to be invoked in order that government can be carried on at all" (*The Times*, 25.10.74). While the Queen has no apparent power of decision-making in normal times, she is extensively briefed on all critical issues. Harold Wilson, a super royalist if ever there was one, has said how accountable to her he always felt in his audiences. The Queen can certainly be said to exercise significant political influence, but like so much of what happens in Parliament, this is based on tradition and not in law. Were a prime minister

[1] I found *The British State* by James Harvey and Katharine Hood and *The British Political System* by John Gollan (both now out of print) very helpful in preparing this article.

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to step outside this traditional framework, much of it would probably shrivel.

The main importance of the monarchy is to provide tangible, colourful and indeed glamorous evidence of the continuity of British political institutions; what Bagehot called its "dignified" function, whereby it helps to create reverence towards the state and the traditional order. As such it is a vital part of the process whereby ideological acceptance of class rule is achieved. (An interesting example of this recognition was the decision of the American occupying power to maintain the "emperorship" in Japan at the end of World War II.) Of course, a monarchy could become a focus of hostility rather than as an element of national unity. When this happens in Britain it seems a fair prediction that those who at present praise it may be prepared to jettison it with the same energy.

How the Commons Functions Now

To try and unravel the intricate procedures of the House of Commons is a difficult and potentially dangerous task.

Firstly, the vast majority of books and courses on the subject treat it as a separate, enclosed world, and one needs to be careful not to follow them into this trap. Any attempt to explain what has happened in the Commons in the past, what is happening now, and will in the future, without reference to events outside, is a grave error. Also in real life it is an error that the ruling class does not commit. As I hope will become obvious in the course of these two articles, *their* practice of politics makes great use of "extra Parliamentary struggle"; so must *ours*.

There is another trap. Although we do not have a "written constitution", we have a powerful unwritten one. The traditions and precedents which operate in the Commons gather accretions of stiffening sediment as time goes on. However, although they are described by constitutional writers as linchpins of our political system, they only fulfil this role because they have not yet been powerfully challenged. We must beware of accepting as ever permanent features of the Parliamentary system, those which have grown up and solidified because of their convenience to the ruling class, and not because they possess the much greater strength they would have if codified in law.

According to *Labour Research*, November 1974, 48.4 per cent of Tory MPs were then company directors. In *Estates and Power in British Society* (edited by Stanworth and Giddens) W. L. Guttsman examines the social, educational and occupational background of MPs from both major parties, and concludes that they are "becoming similar in respect of their social background and career pattern". This is even more the case when the Cabinet is examined. Guttsman states that Wilson's 1970 Cabinet was 80 per cent "middle class"—an almost identical percentage as in the 1964 Conservative Cabinet.

Of course social origins do not always coincide with political position, and this social convergence between MPs of the two main parties needs to be balanced against the enlarged and strengthened left in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

While there are many examples of *direct* ruling class manipulation of British political institutions, it would be totally wrong to regard the Commons as if they were direct nominees of the great monopolies. Parliamentary government succeeds in appearing as "national" government precisely because it is not jerking *directly* on strings from a handful of great monopolists. In fact it is able to mediate, to organise and to conciliate between the different components of the dominant class and other sections of society with considerable flexibility. Indeed the ability to fulfil the overall interests of the ruling class, without having to do so in a direct way, is one of Parliamentary government's greatest strengths.

Although the working class had no vote and no representatives in the mid-19th century, for the ruling class the House of Commons was, to a greater extent than now, a central political arena. It reflected the sometimes titanic conflicts between landed and industrial capitalists.

This downgrading of the importance of the House of Commons for the political decisions of the ruling class has coincided with the period when the organised labour movement has grown into a major political force. It has also paralleled the development of the monopoly stages of capitalism, during which the great monopoly concerns and the apparatus of state have become welded together in an extremely intimate way. Capitalism is very far from the expansionist and progressive stage of its development, when its political expression swaggered across the Parliamentary stage.

What happens in the House of Commons is subject to two enormous controls. The first of these is the maintenance of the two party dominance. The second is the growth of Cabinet power.

Two Party Dominance

First of all it is important to reject the traditional view that the term "two party system" is, or ever has been, an adequate description of party politics in Britain. At all stages there have been significant votes for minority parties, and sometimes significant representation for them, although always for less than that to which their votes would entitle them under a more democratic system. The electoral system, reinforced by parlia-

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mentary procedures, has ensured two party dominance of a multi-party system.

In reading the paragraphs that follow, which attempt to show how the forms of this two party dominance have changed, it is important to remember that throughout the period described there was a continual presence in the Commons of other parties; from Parnell's 86 Irish Members of Parliament in 1885 to the present groups of Liberal, Nationalist and Northern Ireland MPs.

When there was no popular franchise the ruling class had no need for the organised party system in the modern sense. The aristocratic families and the landed gentry controlled the tiny propertied electorate through a corrupt system of rotten boroughs which made parliamentary seats almost their personal property. Under the influence of the French revolution in 1789, the bulk of the property-owning classes began to group around the Tory Party.

The rising industrial capitalists were kept at arm's length, and themselves strove to gain entry to parliamentary power. The 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act was a milestone in this struggle.

John Gollan's book *The British Political System* charts with great clarity how, under the impact of this challenge, the older party alignments took on a new form, arising out of the shifts in economic power accompanying the industrial revolution, and the social changes resulting from it. The 18th-century pattern of conflicts between great family interests and their "placemen" was transformed into a conflict between the interests grouped around landed property on one hand, and the ascendant industrial interests behind the banner of free trade slogans on the other—the Tories metamorphosed into the Conservative Party and the Whigs into the Liberals.

The Parliamentary reform of 1832 gave the vote to industrial interests and that of 1867 to sections of the urban working class, eliminating some of the constituencies dominated by landowners. A mass electorate was in the process of formation after 1867, greatly expanded by later reforms and the winning of the vote for women.

Myth of the Exclusive Two Party System

It was only now, faced with the need to contest and win elections in this new situation, that the two national bourgeois party organisations were formed—both of them carefully subservient to the parliamentary parties, unable to make policy and to impose their decisions. The electoral system with the MPs elected by a simple majority guaranteed stable government, with the two main capitalist parties alternating in power.

Among the employers the return of 29 Labour MPs in 1906 roused deep apprehension, even though they only succeeded because of electoral agreement with the Liberals. These arrangements continued during the two General Elections in 1910, in which first 40 and then 42 Labour members were elected. Not one of these had to fight a Liberal.

Throughout the entire inter-war period in effect a "three party system" (plus independents) operated in Parliament. It was not until the 1931 economic and political crisis that significant sections of the Liberal leadership converged into the Conservatives, helped along by the pressures imposed by the electoral system.

The exclusive two party system was always a myth, but due to our electoral system, the electoral result has normally been alternating governments of the two main parties.

Now a new feature of British politics is the growth of the nationalist and revival of Liberal votes, and the ending of the automatic support the group of Ulster MPs have up till recently given to the Conservatives, which has meant that in the two elections of 1974 neither major party could win an effective majority, even under an electoral system which its advocates claim it is designed to secure (see Table I).

TABLE I

	Labour			*Tory*			*Other*		
	Votes	%	*Seats*	*Votes*	%	*Seats*	*Votes*	%	*Seats*
Feb. 1974	11.5m	37.2	301	11.9m	38.2	297	7.6m	24.5	35
Oct. 1974	11.4m	39.2	319	10.4m	35.8	277	7.1m	24.8	39

Despite their balanced results, these two elections incidentally provide spectacular examples of how effectively the electoral system fences Parliamentary politics within two party confines, and the formidable obstacles the system places in the path of even sizeable "small" parties.

However, at present the two big parties dominate political life. In that we have a "constitution" it tolerates the existence of other political parties, but since all its major features have been evolved by a Parliament controlled by two parties, the system has up to now functioned in a self perpetuating way. As the constitutional writer Sir Ivor Jennings puts it, "the whole constitution from the electoral process to parliamentary procedure assumes the two party system, and because it assumes that system, assists in maintaining it".

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Acceptance of the Capitalist System

Of course it is not the two party domination *as such* which gives rise to consensus politics and shadow-boxing debate. Rather it is the nature of the two parties which make it up. The leaderships, whether Conservative and Liberal before the 1920s, and Conservative and Labour since, have always accepted without question the political imperatives of the capitalist system. Furthermore, the Parliamentary part of the Labour Party, the party in whose ranks are some who challenge the capitalist foundations of society, has up till now been free from control of its "rank and file". The "independence of the Parliamentary Labour Party" is one of the main pillars on which its right-wing domination is based.

There is significant agreement between Tories, Liberals and right-wing Labour, that the MP is a representative, and not a delegate to be mandated. In 1774 the Tory, Edmund Burke, gave a definition that is often quoted with approval. "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion." (*Letter to his Constituents.*)

This theory of the independence of the MP (and hence the parliamentary party) suited ideally the needs of the Conservative and Liberal Parties after 1867. They required election machines outside Parliament but wanted to avoid giving these organisations any say in making policy. By erecting Burke's dictum into the status of an authoritative principle they could create a semblance of democracy in their parties without conceding the reality.

It also suited the right-wing leadership of the Parliamentary Labour Party, anxious to escape the mandates of Labour Conference decisions. Reginald Prentice put the matter with brutal candour in a speech at Bromsgrove only three days before the 1974 Annual Labour Party Conference:

> "The annual conference is an important sounding board for our party. As such, it can influence the evolution of policy but it cannot dictate to MPs who are elected by a democratic vote of all the people in this country. The fiction that annual conference is a supreme policy-making body was written into the Labour Party constitution in 1918. It was already out of date by 1923. Fifty years later it is simply an historical curiosity. Taken literally it would be in direct conflict with the British constitution. Fortunately it has never been taken literally by successive Labour Governments."[2]

[2] I am grateful to an article by Bert Ward in "Themes", a publication of the Lewisham Communist Party, for this point.

As long as the two party system functions in this way it is difficult to envisage the House of Commons being anything other than it has been hitherto.

However, the smooth functioning of the system is absolutely dependent on two vital conditions—the continued domination of the Labour Party by right-wing leaders and policy, and the exclusion from Parliament of Communist MPs and revolutionary class struggle.

Centralised Power

The second great pressure on the Commons stems from the concentration of power and authority in the hands of the "Prime Minister in Cabinet".

This power derives from a number of factors. Firstly, there are few overriding legal restraints on government actions. A Minister may break the existing law, but then there is nothing to stop the government passing a new law to make legal what was previously illegal. The following excerpt from *Keesings Contemporary Archives* provides a stunning example of this power in operation:

> "At Westminster a one-clause Bill (The Northern Ireland Bill 1972) was passed through all its stages on February 23 and *enacted the same night,* legalising—with retroactive effect—routine activities of British troops in Northern Ireland, such as the power to disperse assemblies or to stop and search persons and vehicles. The Bill became urgently necessary after the High Court in Northern Ireland had delivered a judgment earlier the same day declaring some of the Army's regular activities under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (Northern Ireland 1922) to be *ultra vires.* The situation was explained to Mr. Wilson (then leader of the Opposition) by Mr. Heath personally *on privy councillor terms of confidentiality.*"

So strong is the power of the British Government that it can be seriously doubted whether there is a British constitution at all, that is if a constitution is "a system of effective restraint upon government action". (*Constitutionalism and Democracy,* C. Friedrich, p. 26.)

The second feature of this remarkable concentration of political authority in Britain is its equally remarkable flexibility. During World War II British governments were rapidly able to achieve a very high degree of centralised control and effective total planning.

There has been an almost continual history of very highly concentrated political power being exercised by central administration governing in a "forum" of democratic debate. While the "forum" has varied greatly, the predominance of the centralised power has been unchanged. It may

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be that in a strict sense of government dependent on uncontrolled, critical, hence shifting and uncertain, majorities in Parliament, Britain has probably only experienced "Parliamentary Government" in the period between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. Before 1832 Ministers were normally supported because of the patronage they wielded! After 1867, because they were leaders of the majority party; only in between because they won a majority in Parliament.

Prime Minister in Cabinet

On what is the ascendance of the "Prime Minister in Cabinet" based?

Firstly, a modern Prime Minister has considerable powers of patronage. In 1900 the total number of MPs involved in government was 42. Today it is 72. Obviously many backbenchers will weigh up these short odds in deciding their political actions. Of course, the increased size and resolution of the left in the Parliamentary Labour Party is beginning to limit the effectiveness of this pressure, as the ministerial resignations in the life of the present government have shown.

Walter Bagehot's *The British Constitution* described the "efficient secret" as distinct from the "dignified façade" of British government "as the close union, the nearly complete fusion, of the executive and legislative powers . . . the connecting link is the Cabinet. By that new word we mean a committee of the legislative body selected to be the executive body." However in the 100 years since Bagehot wrote, Cabinet Government has become not merely party government—but a committee of the party chosen by the Prime Minister from Parliament. The Prime Minister as party leader has now a unique position. He wields more patronage as the size of Ministries grows larger. He has some measure of control over the Civil Service (although few have used it). He has the back-up of a powerful Cabinet Secretariat. In addition to being leader of the Government as a collective body, he is now undisputed leader of the majority party.

The Prime Minister has the right to obtain a dissolution when he requires it, and this is a powerful disciplinary weapon, although a clumsy one with its risks of striking down the whole party.

If challenged, his rivals are chained by the doctrine of collective responsibility. Callaghan, and Wilson before him, have continually brandished this control to silence the dissident statements of left-wing Ministers. Of course, this "doctrine" is rapidly being promoted to the status of the "unwritten constitution". There is nothing holy or legal about it—it is accepted.

Decisions are made either by the Prime Minister, by Standing Committees of the Cabinet or by *ad hoc* Committees which are continually being set up to report on a particular problem. At every stage there exists an informed "inner cabinet".

Cabinet Ministers can, of course, resign, but examples of such resignations over the last 30 years do not suggest that the power of a Prime Minister is greatly shaken even by such rare events as the resignation of a Bevan or a Heffer.

Government Without Approval of Parliament

There are vast areas of executive activity which the government carries out without having to seek approval in the House of Commons. Some of this activity concerns fundamental issues of war and peace and the direction of foreign relations. In her book, *Independence and Deterrence,* Professor Margaret Gowring has revealed how decisions about the atom bomb did not even reach the Cabinet. "The Cabinet took no part in the decision to establish a research establishment, to produce plutonium, or later to build a gaseous diffusion plant to separate uranium 235; no part in the decisions to make and test an atomic bomb; no part in the decisions about priorities, or about crucially important atomic relations with other countries."

An article by John Whale in the *Sunday Times,* July 20, 1975, revealed how the notorious Beeching Report to slash railway mileage had a secret predecessor, the Stedeford, which was suppressed. Whale writes: "The Stedeford Affair was a classic Whitehall incident. In 1959 Marples and Harold Macmillan wanted a high-powered group to decide, without fuss, what to do about the railways. To chair it they chose Sir Ivan Stedeford, head of Tube Investments. He was a friend of Lord Mills, Macmillan's industrial advisor. There were only three other members: Frank Kearton (now Lord Kearton and head of Courtaulds); Sir Henry Benson, an accountant, and Beeching from ICI, recommended by the Bank of England." Whale states that even six years later, when Barbara Castle, then Minister of Transport, asked to see the report, officials declined to show it to her.

Today a successful Private Member's Bill of any importance is a rarity. The government so completely monopolises the legislative time of the House of Commons that unless the government is prepared to find time for it a Private Member's Bill has almost no chance of reaching the statute book.

Government Bills are shielded from the intervention of MPs by a number of defences. Firstly, the preparation of a Bill, the briefing of the Minister responsible for introducing it are invariably the task of the permanent civil servants. Secondly, *before* publication of the Bill, there are extensive consultations with the various "interests"

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the government think should be considered, in particular the viewpoint of the CBI. Significantly in the "platform" on which he conducted his campaign for the Labour Party leadership, Benn highlighted the virtual exclusion of MPs from this all-important pre-publication lobbying as a reason for the changes he intended to introduce. Thirdly, the process of amendment is hedged around by thickets of standing orders. Fourthly, and most powerfully, the power of party discipline guarantees the required government majority. Fifthly, if that party discipline fails, the present Labour Government can vote with the Conservatives to defeat a progressive left amendment. This happened in spring 1976 with the *Shipbuilding and Aircraft Nationalisation Bill*, when the government joined with Tories and the Scottish National Party to squash a left move to define "independent" trade unions in those industries as those which are affiliated to the TUC.

Struggle Inside and Outside Parliament

Obviously in the evenly balanced House of Commons now, the government can rely only on the narrowest of majorities to carry it through, but almost always this century, governments have been able to force through their legislation by exercising their majorities and terminating debate by invoking the guillotine procedure. Where governments have been blocked, it has been more by decisive class action outside Parliament than by filibustering in it.

The importance of trade union action in rendering the Industrial Relations Act "inoperable" is well known. Another example was in December 1934 when the Unemployment Assistance Board introduced new regulations for the payment of relief, which were penal in their effect on many workers. Wal Hannington's book *Never on our Knees* describes the explosion of anger that followed, which in two months forced the government to withdraw the regulation. R. Miliband puts it rather well in his book *Parliamentary Socialism*:

> "The leadership of the labour movement followed the agitation—it did not lead it; and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that, had the unemployed solely relied on the efforts of that leadership, the government would not have been quite so ready to withdraw the regulation" (p. 215).

A highly significant development among some of the left in the Parliamentary Labour Party, in the lifetime of the present government, has been a growing recognition of the need to connect their fight in Parliament with the movement outside. For example, following the left's *en bloc* defiance of the government whip over the cuts in public service expenditure, a number of them appealed to the movement to rally to their defence.

In its essentials the British system of government is clear cut. A Prime Minister dominates a Cabinet, which in turn dominates a party majority in the House of Commons. This party, under the same leader, has to fight periodic General Elections; if the party wins the election, then the Prime Minister and his Cabinet control the entire machinery of legislature and administration. If they lose they go into opposition.

What emerges from this picture is the decisive importance of the political "unit" formed by the "Prime Minister in Cabinet". This "unit" is very much the nerve centre of the political institutions of the modern state, but at the same time *it is based in the House of Commons both in its constitutional functioning, and as the source of its legitimacy.*

Within this limited context of influencing but not controlling, Parliamentary criticism without extra Parliamentary struggle is able to exert some small effect on government action. However, despite the establishment of some new institutions and the writing of many volumes urging greater power to the House of Commons, parliamentary "control" remains very weak.

Parliamentary Committees

The House of Commons is an important forum for the criticism of government, for the ventilation of grievances, and the prising out of information. The general debates are occasions when the government is forced to explain its actions or intentions before a partly hostile audience, which can gain much publicity. All legislation is generally considered by a "Standing Committee" in its committee stage. These committees are designed to reproduce the balance of power in the House, and are intended to permit a degree of specialisation in their personnel.

However, their ability to probe very deeply is inhibited by the fact that they have no vestige of executive power. Unlike the Standing Committees of the American Congress or the French Assembly, they cannot summon people and papers before them. They cannot debate or discuss matters not directly relevant to the actual text of the Bill before them. They have no research staff on call. In other words, they are watchdogs held in check by pretty substantial chains.

The inability of the House to keep abreast of the enormous mass of material from the Common Market institutions highlighted a problem that is greatly magnified for individual MPs, especially those who do not have the resources to pay for secretaries and offices in London. The reality is often one of MPs drowning in a sea of paper,

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rushing from one committee room to another, some of them understanding little of the background to the decisions they must make.

Select Committees are appointed by the House of Commons from time to time to deal with particular matters as they arise, but some have become permanent. (Select Committees can summon people and papers before them, although they rarely do so.) Of these the most important are the Committee of Public Accounts (whose duty is to check whether money is spent on the purpose for which it was voted), of Estimates (whose job is to suggest economies on current estimates), of Statutory Instruments (Statutory Instruments are acts by Ministers carried out under delegated legislation, which have the validity of law, even though they have not been passed by Parliament), also known as the "Scrutiny Committee" (whose job is to check on the use of delegated legislation by Ministers), of Nationalised Industries (whose job is to examine reports and accounts of the Nationalised Industries). There are considerable differences in the "powers" and terms of reference possessed by these committees, but in 1968-9 another Select Committee, that on Procedure, examined the question of "Scrutiny of Public Expenditure and Administration" and concluded that "the existing system of select committees for scrutinising policy and its execution is at present inadequate".

Discussions on Reform

There has been a considerable discussion of the need for reform of the House of Commons since the early sixties—one stream of this discussion has been concerned with how to modernise procedure so that certain kinds of business, government business as it has turned out to be, can be dealt with more quickly; the other was concerned with how to strengthen the House of Commons in relation to the government of the day.

This second line of argument has succeeded in instituting variants on "Select Committee" procedure; subject committees (of which the Science & Technology Committee was an example); departmental committees (which roughly coincide with the area of responsibility of a government department, e.g. the one on Education and Science). There have been Subject Committees which owe their existence to extra Parliamentary innovation, e.g. the Committee on Race Relations and Immigration.

The House of Commons is now saddled with this odd patchwork of committees of scrutiny. There seems little evidence for believing that the judgment of the select committee on procedure in 1969 does not hold good today. However, a significant result of the increased size of the left in the Parliamentary Labour Party has been a more widespread deployment of MPs determined to put up a real fight in the Commons Committees, and this greater muscle has given more than one Minister a fairly rough ride. Nonetheless it is difficult to envisage one of these committees, as they function at present, being able to unearth any British Watergate!

Since 1974, a third stream of argument for Commons reform, associated with Benn and the *Tribune Group,* has placed the emphasis of needed reform more on the stage in the legislative process the MPs influence is brought to bear, rather than on the structures through which it can be expressed. Their arguments correctly point out the enormous weight monopoly vested interests exert on the formulation of legislation, before it reaches the Commons, and begin to call for greater involvement of MPs, trade unions and democratic organisations in the preparation of policy. So far this third strand of reform argumentation has made no measurable difference to Parliamentary procedures.

Parliamentary Criticism and Mass Action

The most spectacular occasion for criticism of Ministers is Question Time. However, the picture of Ministers under daily fire, sandbagged by a host of supplementaries, is a false one. Chester and Bowring, in their study *Questions in Parliament,* show in brutal detail how adroitly Ministers may dodge, or be shielded from, any damaging shafts. One of the Cabinet's best defences is time. Chester and Bowring write: "The House of Commons has conferred vast new powers on government departments, yet appears unable or unwilling to provide even an extra half-hour on four days a week for questioning Ministers."

In 1967 the Office of Parliamentary Commissioner was established, adding a new component to the "patchwork" of control. The "Ombudsman's" job is to investigate complaints about Ministerial activity passed on via MPs. It is very significant that the job of "policing the bureaucracy" should in the British political system be linked to the House of Commons and not be exercised by any judicial or quasi-judicial agency. It is a further example of the *concentration* of power in the Commons, which makes it unique among elected assemblies in advanced capitalist democracies. However, as a watchdog the office has made little impact.

In a sense far more than the relative powerlessness of this puny apparatus of scrutiny, the dominant factor is the voluntary restraint that numbs the vast majority of MPs: "Parliamentarianism" or "Parliamentary cretinism", as Lenin preferred to call it. Many once fiery labour

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militants have been first muzzled, then corrupted by the cloying clasp of the corridors of Westminster's power. The essence of a "Parliamentary" style of criticism is to discredit the government, so that the Opposition may win the next election. There is normally little expectation of forcing a change in policy. That is from the Labour Party right. It is significant that sometimes the Conservative Party in opposition has clearly seen that the most effective way to block and change government policy to which they are opposed is to combine a powerful attack on that policy in the House, *with the mobilisation of their class support outside the House of Commons.* Their opposition to the Second Reading of the Transport Bill in 1946 (which nationalised road haulage) is an interesting example well described in J. D. Hoffman's *The Conservative Party in Opposition.* In the House "the Bill was opposed with a greater show of hostility than any piece of Government legislation hitherto presented to Parliament". Outside the Conservatives worked to mobilise their own class support. "For some time the Conservative Party had been closely associated with the anti-nationalisation campaign being conducted by the Road Haulage Association" (of which Lord Wootton, Party Chairman, was President). Hoffman goes on to speak of "the party's link with agitation in the country". However, in the present evenly balanced House it is possible to detect a consistent readiness by this government to weaken its own Bills at the slightest sign of fuss from the Tories. The Conservatives are not having to do much "extra Parliamentary" struggling at present!

Right-wing Labour Party leaders have always regarded Parliamentary criticism as a substitute for mass action by the working class outside Parliament. Without extra-Parliamentary struggle, opposition in the House of Commons can be little more than a charade, dangerous in that it strengthens the illusion that people's interests are being looked after there.

The Civil Service

The theory of the neutrality of the Civil Service in the class struggle took a good knock with the publication of Crossman's book *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister.* That it is a right-wing Labour leader furnishing the evidence in a sense makes it even more telling, even though his position would not have inclined him to challenge it. His memoirs illustrate the extent to which Ministers are enveloped in and subjected to the powerful influence of the senior ranks of the Civil Service. Describing his first days as Minister of Housing, Crossman writes: ". . . I realise the tremendous effort it requires not to be taken over by the Civil Service. I cannot help realising that one has to be pretty strong-minded . . . not to be got down by this astonishing Whitehall hierarchy, by the way the establishment takes you into itself, and folds you into its bosom." Ministers and governments may come and go, but the Civil Service remains and so does the consistently right-wing character of its embrace. Of course, whether the Civil Service will be quite so formidable when faced by a Cabinet determined to challenge monopoly power has yet to be tested. (A further article in this series will analyse the role of the Civil Service.)

In the lifetime of the present Labour Government the appointment of special advisers to Cabinet Ministers is a new and potentially important dimension to this question. In January 1976 the Government was challenged by the Tories on the status and duties of the 29 such people it had appointed from outside the Civil Service. One of them, Mr. Terry Pitt, was reported in *The Times* (Jan. 26, 1976) as saying: "You need them [special advisers] because the Civil Service is a status quo organisation . . . if Ministers are going to pursue radical policies they need people who will help them to push the Civil Service. The failures to appoint such people in the past is the reason why so many Ministers have been the servants instead of the masters in their Departments."

Now the idea that such a group, no matter how talented, can insulate a Cabinet Minister from the pressures of what is still one of the most powerful and sophisticated Civil Services in the capitalist world, is far-fetched to say the least. However, this development may lead to left pressure in the Labour Party for a version of the French Ministerial Cabinet system to be established here, whereby each Minister would have his or her own Cabinet—a sort of counter-Whitehall structure. Furthermore the issues raised in controversy around special advisers can be a step towards the clearer recognition of the class role of the state.

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The Role of General Strikes Today

Bert Ramelson

In this 50th anniversary year of the General Strike there has been a veritable flood of material published, broadcast and telecast on the General Strike of 1926.

The books, articles, films and broadcasts come from almost every shade of the political spectrum and cover factually, as well as in a distorted way, descriptive material, reminiscences of participants on both sides of the "barricades", as well as "think pieces" attempting to interpret its significance and impact not only for the Labour Movement and the general political and social life in Britain during that particular period, but also on the development of the Labour Movement and political life in the succeeding decades.

It is not my intention to write yet another article on the 1926 General Strike, but rather to express some thoughts on the role of general strikes as a weapon in the ceaseless general class struggle today within the framework of a capitalist Britain, as well as their function in the armoury of the working class in the fight for the revolutionary transformation of society.

It goes without saying, however, that it is only possible to arrive at even tentative conclusions on this theme by drawing on the experiences of the General Strike; but not only on British experiences in 1926 and since, but also on the role of general strikes over the years in other countries too.

I am prompted to do so because in recent times it has become fashionable on the one hand on the part of some of the "way out left" to shout 'general strike' in season and out of season, arguing for turning every sectional strike into a general strike and seeing the general strike as the only prelude to revolution, and, on the other hand, for the "establishment" of the Trade Union and Labour Movement to make an equally harmful dogmatic assertion —"Never Again".

Strikes and the Class Struggle

The starting point in this discussion is the basic assumption, no longer confined to Marxists, that conflict, the class struggle is an integral part of the functioning of a class-divided society.

How that struggle expresses itself, the form it takes, the level and intensity it assumes, will vary depending on a whole number of circumstances, but it is ever present.

Strikes and other forms of industrial action, e.g. interfering with or interrupting the process of production or provision of services, or the threat of such actions on the part of the workers are undoubtedly a sharp expression of that conflict, certainly in the daily struggle for the division of the product of labour, as well as playing an important role in the maturing process of the long term struggle to transform society.

But it would be wrong to see the class struggle solely in terms of strikes. It permeates the whole of society in a multitude of ways, not least important of which is in the ideological field.

The trade unions came into existence as a result of the workers' experiences that only by combining and confronting the employers as a collective able to frustrate the employers' purpose in life—to make profit by appropriating surplus value in the process of production—by halting or interfering with it through industrial action would their bargaining position be strengthened. The more powerful the trade union, the more embracing it is of the workforce confronting the employer, the stronger would be their bargaining position.

The role of solidarity action whether it be through "blacking" or sympathetic action of fellow workers of other than their own employer, was a natural development of the process of strengthening the bargaining strength of trade unions in the continuous struggle for the division of the product of labour.

This has always been and remains the primary function of trade unions. That is not to say that there has not developed a strong trend amongst trade unionists of seeking a more directly political role for the trade unions in the fight for changing society in the struggle for Socialism, nor is it to deny that industrial action for economic demands has political implications or even motivation.

Syndicalist Trend

Indeed, at an earlier stage in the development of trade unionism there was a strong syndicalist tendency which saw trade unionism as the sole means of achieving Socialism. Indeed, such a minor trend existed during the 1926 General Strike who mistakenly did see the General Strike as a direct challenge to the capitalist system, with the objective of achieving working class power.

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But it was a very minor trend. The attitude of the overwhelming majority of the working class to the General Strike was that it was a solidarity action with the miners against wage cuts, more readily expressed because it was so obvious that a defeat for the miners would be a prelude to cuts in everyone's wage.

This is surely evident from the immediate and almost universal return to work—apart from the miners—when the General Council called the General Strike off. It is true that some were deceived by the General Council into believing that the Government and mining employers were ready to make significant concessions, but that merely underlines the fact that the workers saw the General Strike in basically trade union terms.

The General Strike all but gave the coup de grace to syndicalism as a serious trend within the trade union movement in Britain for a generation and more though there are some signs of attempts to revive it.

But to reject syndicalism as an ideology does not mean to reduce industrial action to purely economic struggle, drained of political and social content or even objective, and to embrace parliamentarism as the sole means of achieving socialist objectives, nor that there is not a role for the general strike both in achieving important economic, social, democratic and political objectives on the road to Socialism and, in particular, in defence and consolidation of political power when achieved by the working class and its allies.

Changing Forms of Struggle

In examining the role of the general strike as an economic and/or political weapon in contemporary times, the starting point must surely be that forms of struggle as distinguished from struggle itself are, like everything else, not static but constantly changing, and not only are the forms of struggle subject to change but also the effect and impact of these struggles.

One of the most significant characteristics of contemporary times is the speed with which the productive forces and hence the production process have been changing.

These changes and the rate of change, by their very nature have had a profound effect on relations of production, on the size, organisation, greater interdependence of the units of production and the role of the state, both as a major employer as well as in its inteventionary economic and industrial role.

Indeed, contemporary history is rich in the diversity of new forms of highly effective industrial struggle, made possible as a result of the changes in the productive forces. Work-ins, sit-ins, occupations, "work to rule", "blacking", strikes by small groups of employees in an integrated industry, and flying pickets are some examples of the new forms of struggle.

While nearly all of these forms of industrial action have been used before, their widespread use and effectiveness because of their adaption to modern productive processes have given them a qualitatively new character.

Thus the "flying pickets" during the 1972 miners' strike were more effective, not only in securing the miners' wage demands but, by smashing Heath's N—1 (N minus one) incomes policy, also in winning wage increases for the whole working class, whereas the General Strike failed to prevent cuts in the miners' wages and was followed by cuts in wages of all workers.

The miners in 1926 were not less militant or determined than the miners in 1972 or 1974.

The difference was primarily due to changes in the productive forces—the creation of a National Grid, an integrated energy industry, the almost total reliance of all industry on the effective functioning of the National Grid, which in turn was dependent on a relatively small number of key power stations. The "flying pickets", together with the solidarity of the railway workers and electricity supply workers in "blacking" the delivery of coal to the stations, and the solidarity of the Birmingham engineers with the "flying pickets", forced the capitulation of the Heath Government to the miners' demands.

There are many examples in recent years, e.g. in the motor car and steel industries, where industrial action (not necessarily even a strike), a ban on overtime or work to rule in one plant or even a single shop producing components of a highly integrated industry, spread over the whole country or even over a number of countries, brought or threatened to bring to a stop a whole industry vital to the economy as a whole, and, as a consequence, greatly strengthened the bargaining power of the workers involved. This was often achieved to a degree inconceivable a generation ago, involving a much greater disposition of workers in struggle, greater perhaps even than a national strike, with much less sacrifice on the part of the workers or strain on the Unions.

Changes in forms of struggle, evolving new effective methods, involve also evaluation of the relative effectiveness of past forms of struggle.

When are General Strikes the Appropriate Form of Action?

The problem of the general strike as a form of solidarity action with a section of workers in struggle, often ignored by those who seek to convert a particular strike in a single industry or even enterprise into a general strike, is a twofold one.

Firstly, it is a failure to grasp that, while the instinctive class feeling of solidarity is very strong

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in our working class movement, it will express itself in forms limited to what is felt necessary to achieve the objective of those with whom the solidarity action is taken.

British workers are much more aware than the "arm-chair strategists" of the changes in production, the interdependence of the production process, not only within a given industry but between industries and the economy as a whole.

The consequences of this grasp of modern conditions will seem to many that "solidarity" adequate to success can very often be expressed by limited forms far short of a general strike.

The second consideration ignored is the danger that a solidarity general strike with a particular union or unions involved in industrial action for their demands could have the opposite effect to that intended.

So long as the emphasis is on the degree of solidarity essential to victory, the control of the industrial action lies with those directly involved. The union and membership involved in the struggle will have the sole responsibility of determining the terms of settlement.

Once a general strike is called it is difficult, if not impossible, to prevent the passing over of control and the making of the decisive decisions from the union directly involved, who feels strongest about the issue, to the General Council. The slogan "more power to the General Council" put forward by the Communist Party during and in the months preceding the General Strike was, in my opinion, an error.

I would argue that the miners' victories in 1972 and 1974 were in no small measure achieved precisely because, unlike 1926, they were at all times in control and they, not the General Council, took the decisions and, when they felt it necessary, ignored the advice of the General Council and the Labour leaders.

Does anyone really believe that, had the miners' asked the General Council to call a general strike instead of solidarity action confined to a call not to cross picket lines, the miners' strikes in the 70s would have achieved a more successful outcome economically and in the political impact than they did?

If anyone does, with the present composition of the General Council and the present level of political class consciousness of the working class (and we cannot ignore that), then all I can say is that they live in cloud cuckoo land.

From what has been said so far it is fair to conclude that, in my view, the role of the general strike—in contemporary Britain, bearing in mind British trade union traditions and the changes in the process of production—is less relevant than in the past as a weapon of class struggle on issues where the predominant factor is the achievement of an economic or industrial objective of a sectional nature, albeit it may have a political element and wider implications than just for the workers involved in the struggle, and where the general strike is intended as an expression of class solidarity. But it can by no means be excluded.

Political Implications

So far I have dealt with general strikes in the context of a primarily economic or industrial struggle in contemporary Britain. I am well aware, however, that no struggle is devoid of political implications.

But what is important in a concrete analysis of any industrial action is to assess what is the dominant feature in the particular industrial action. It is the dominant factor that determines its character and, in making such an analysis, it must be an on-going, continuous one. It may very well change its character in the course of the struggle itself.

Struggle has a dynamic of its own. Industrial action may very well start out as a simple, straightforward traditionally trade union action, but in the course of the struggle, for a variety of reasons, may become transformed in character.

The 1974 miners' strike undoubtedly started as a straightforward wages strike. But a wages strike with a difference. It was a strike only nominally against the Coal Board. The Coal Board was willing and even anxious to make concessions.

It was the Government that prevented a settlement, for it went contrary to its incomes policy and in a real sense was a direct challenge to the state. Indeed, the main negotiations were with Heath in Downing Street and not with Ezra at Hobart House (headquarters of the Coal Board).

During the course of the struggle, the balance of the economic and political ingredients of the strike were transformed with the political implications becoming the dominant ones.

The decision of the Tory Government to dissolve Parliament and call a General Election on the issue "Who runs the country—the Trade Unions or the Government?" high-lighted the transformation of the character of the strike in the course of its development, objectively in the effect it had in grinding down industry with the 3-day week. It was as effective, probably, as a general strike, but even more important in the subjective thinking of the miners as well as millions of workers who were beginning to see its dominant political character, but, so far from being frightened off, were actually intensifying their actions of solidarity with the miners. The most outstanding example was the magnificent action of the Birmingham engineering workers joining the miners' pickets at Saltley. As an aside it is worth mentioning that the General

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Council's attitude was rather lukewarm, not matching the support of the rank and file and some individual unions.

Thus, while, as I have argued earlier, the General Strike started out as an industrial strike against wage cuts, the Baldwin Government's role in preparing for it and assuming direct responsibility for mobilising its defeat and presenting it as a challenge for "power" in its propaganda injected a political dimension into it, presented clear political and democratic tasks but not a revolutionary situation.

State Intervention in Industrial Relations

Since 1926, state monopoly capitalism has developed at a very rapid pace. The state has been compelled to play a much more open interventionist role in the conduct of the economy, resorting not only to the traditional monetary and fiscal measures, but openly in what is generally described as industrial relations.

In post-war Britain, the balance of strength between the working and employing classes has shifted considerably in favour of the working class.

The trade unions have become much more powerful numerically, structurally, organisationally, democratically, embracing wider strata of wage and salary earners as well as much more militant, especially at the level of the workplace.

The level of struggle for wages and conditions was unprecedented, in its successes in compelling concessions as a result of strengthened bargaining position.

This change in the balance of power led to the state being forced to, more and more, end its pretence of "neutrality" and come out openly on the side of the employers, with its efforts of over a quarter of a century of attempting to regulate wages by "consent"—that is, voluntary incomes policy—if possible, and the use of state sanctions if the former failed.

The resistance of the trade union movement and particularly the lack of confidence that the trade union leaders could make incomes policy—voluntary or statutory—"stick", led the state naturally to legally deprive the trade unions of their basic function, imposing legal restrictions on the right to use any form of industrial action except under rigidly determined state conditions. Labour attempted it first with the *In Place of Strife* Bill and were followed by the Tories' Industrial Relations Act.

Era of "Confrontation"

With these measures, the ruling class through its state transformed the "industrial/political mix" of most strikes. Every wages struggle was a challenge to the law, to the state itself.

It ushered in the era of "confrontation". A series of unofficial national strikes took place, some of a semi-official character with a number of unions (the most outstanding one being the AUEW) officially participating in them, this time not on a specific wages issue, but against Government policy, challenging the state and its most sacred institutions, Parliament itself and the courts on which the state relies to enforce its writ.

Undoubtedly this confrontation between trade unionists and the state reached its peak with the arrest of the Pentonville Five, who defied a Court injunction and the AUEW's call for an unlimited national strike in response to the Court's sequestration of all its funds.

The reaction of the workers was immediate. Workers all over the country began what was rapidly developing into a rolling general strike.

Their intentions were clear—an unlimited general strike until the five dockers were freed.

The response of the General Council, frightened of a general strike which they would not be able to control, was to call for a "token" one-day general strike if the Pentonville Five were not released by the following Monday—giving the Government five days breathing space.

During that breathing space the unofficial general strike was growing by leaps and bounds.

The Government, faced with this threat, and

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above all the determination of the rank and file to make an unlimited general strike, irrespective of the General Council who were tailing instead of leading this confrontation, capitulated. A "legal fiction" was discovered, which did not take anybody in. A similar capitulation to the engineers national strike call's challenge to the court was the mysterious payment of their fine by anonymous donors accepted by Sir John Donaldson in discharge of the fine, annulling the sequestration order. This despite the fact that the day previously, before the national strike was called, he refused a similar offer. The five dockers were released. A "Red Friday" indeed of much greater significance than the historic "Red Friday".

Contemporary Lessons

What lessons can be drawn from this experience and what followed on the contemporary role of general strikes in Britain?

Quite a few.

The idea of a national or even a general strike with very strong political overtones, challenging the state, has become a much more acceptable concept in the British trade union movement, even though social democracy is still its dominant ideology.

Since then, resolutions calling for industrial action in support of social Government-determined issues (as distinguishable from issues subject to negotiations between unions and employers) such as increased pensions, improved social services, against general unemployment, have been passed by successive Trade Union Congresses, though not acted upon as yet.

Thus what has been common on the Continent—short limited general strikes for social and political objectives, as well as traditionally trade union issues—becomes a real possibility now in Britain and this is an important ideological advance for us.

But I think we must add that at the present level of development, there must also be a strong economic and industrial element within them capable of being realised within the framework of capitalism and not presented as or seen by the workers as a challenge to the system itself.

At the present stage of state monopoly capitalism, and in the context of the general crisis of capitalism with the state attacking the money wage as well as the social wage more and more, the conditions for this type of united national industrial action for limited objectives exist, are possible, and should become widespread demands.

But the most important lesson of all is that it is an illusion that the general strike is *the* weapon for seizing power for the working class and its allies to build a socialist Britain, that it is a substitute for the revolutionary Party winning the support of a big majority of the working class and its allies for that objective, on the background of heightened class struggle which would include national and even general strikes for limited objectives.

We must not underestimate the ruling class and its state. If a united struggle, including a general strike, started for a limited objective, even though it has strong political implications, in the course of the struggle assumes greater political significance, the ruling class are usually astute enough not to allow it to continue to the point where it could only be resolved by a change in power.

The limited objective would be conceded, as it was in releasing the Pentonville Five, in allowing the Industrial Relations Act to be put on the shelf long before it was repealed, and as the Baldwin Government would undoubtedly have done by conceding to the General Strike by extending the subsidy or some other means if the General Council in 1926 had been firm and not capitulated.

The real role of an unlimited general strike in the revolutionary struggle for transforming society in our conditions, as I see it, lies, firstly, in the cumulative ideological effect of actions for limited objectives which contribute to the creation of a political situation where the possibilities emerge from the overwhelming majority of the workers and their allies as a result of their experience in struggle, voting for a genuine socialist government committed to and determined to build socialism.

And secondly, perhaps the most important, it is if it becomes necessary, as a weapon to be used to prevent interference in the democratic electoral process, and in what will undoubtedly become the most difficult problem of such a socialist government in the consolidation of its newly democratically-won power faced with attempts by the displaced ruling class to sabotage the Government's efforts, through economic or other less peaceful means.

The British workers having been won for socialism and experienced themselves on the background of struggle, in a General Election for a socialist government, would undoubtedly be prepared then to use the general strike—an irresistible weapon—to defend such a government and its policies against attempts to sabotage such policies and government.

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Discussion on the Popular Front:

Forty Years of Popular Front Government

Eric Hobsbawm

Last year in the October and November issues of Marxism Today *we published two articles by Monty Johnstone on "Trotsky and the Popular Front". We continue discussion of the Popular Front with the article by Professor E. J. Hobsbawm printed below. We are hoping to publish in a subsequent issue an article by A. M. Elliott on "The Popular Front in Spain".*

Among the numerous anniversaries celebrated this year—from Adam Smith to the General Strike—I would like to talk about one which continues to be of practical interest to socialists today. Forty years ago, in 1936, the first people's front governments were formed in France and Spain; that is to say, coalitions of communists with social-democrats and certain middle-class parties which were not seen as the immediate preliminary to revolution and working-class power. Such governments had always before then been condemned by the revolutionary left. They were regarded as typically social-democratic, likely to be dominated, directly or indirectly, by the bourgeoisie, and therefore likely to divert the movement from its real task, which was to make revolution. The only major exception to this might occur in colonial and semi-colonial countries, where—according to the Program of the Communist International (1928)—the dictatorship of the proletariat was not the immediate aim of the communists, but a more or less rapid transition from a bourgeois-democratic to a socialist revolution would have to take place.

Without going into the complex history of earlier communist discussions, let me simply say that people's front or coalition governments of the kind I have sketched were quite new and shocking in the 1930s, and raised serious debates within the revolutionary movement which have not ceased to this day. Before the war two people's front governments failed. The French never overcame its internal contradictions and the half-heartedness of the Socialists who led it, and faded away in 1938. The Spanish was faced with Franco's rising, and went down in defeat in 1939. But people's front governments, in the form of governments of anti-fascist unity in the war against Hitler were formed during and after the war, if anything on an even broader basis than had been envisaged in the 1930s. In 1946 there were few countries which did not have them. They were the rule in the People's Democracies (which were so-called precisely because they were not then supposed to be exclusively communist governments), and in the West there were Communist ministers in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy and Norway until they were expelled or resigned with the coming of the Cold War. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries governments of a broad anti-imperialist front were, of course, also common and less controversial.

For several years after 1947 people's front governments—outside the areas of colonial liberation—were neither practicable nor encouraged, but in the 1960s and 1970s there has been a return to this type of perspective, notably in Italy, France and Spain. At this moment the possible entry of the Italian CP into the government is the major issue in Italian politics. So the issues raised by such governments are not merely historical, but belong to practical politics.

Revolutionary Perspectives after World War I

The international communist movement was founded on the assumption that a world revolution, or at least a revolution in important regions of the world, was both practicable and imminent. That revolution would not necessarily take the Russian form, but nevertheless the October Revolution was in a profound sense the model both of what ought to and would happen, and of the strategy, tactics and organisation for making it happen. This is why the new Communist International insisted on the most rigid and exclusive conditions for joining it. It wanted an effective world party of revolutionaries. It obviously wanted to exclude from this movement and its national sections the right-wing Social-Democrats who had betrayed proletarian internationalism in 1914, and

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revealed themselves as deeply committed to capitalist society or even—as in Germany—as its main saviours. However, it also wanted to exclude anyone even partly committed to the non-bolshevik way, anyone unwilling to break with social-democratic tradition and organisation in the most total and public manner.

In the excitement of the moment there were, after 1918, plenty of people and parties willing to declare themselves communists or even, carried away by the mood of global revolution or the radicalisation of the masses, to affiliate with the Communist International. What the International wanted, however, was not an influx of the miscellaneous left, but an international bolshevik party. It thus deliberately rejected most of those wanting to join it, leaving the quite important group of left-wing socialist parties—or at least those unwilling to make the total break—to float vaguely in the space between social-democracy and the Comintern. Several of them tried briefly to organise themselves into the so-called 'Two-and-a-Half International' or Vienna Union before drifting back to social-democracy after 1922, for want of anywhere else to go.

This approach made sense only on the assumption that the Russian revolution would soon be followed by other revolutions, or that an international revolutionary crisis offering similar perspectives would very soon recur. In 1918-20 this seemed a perfectly realistic assessment. It is quite unhistorical to blame Lenin, in the light of hindsight, for setting-up an International on the basis of splitting the old international movement—or what remained of it—on the narrowest and most exclusive basis. The situation looked, and was, revolutionary. In such a situation the masses would follow the most consistent revolutionaries. The vital thing was to see that these were consistently and effectively revolutionary, rather than to convert a larger percentage of the old non-bolshevik socialist parties into communist ones at the cost of compromise.

Exploring Alternative Strategies

Hardly had the Comintern established itself effectively when it became clear that its original hopes would not be realised. From the early 1920s it had to operate in a non-revolutionary situation, at least in most of Europe, though in much of the colonial, semi-colonial and dependent world a revolutionary situation could be said to exist, or to be probable, or even imminent. However, at this stage the great majority of marxists did not regard the colonial revolutions as the immediate forerunners of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and socialist construction. As the programme of the Communist International put it in 1928:

> "as a rule, transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat in these countries will be possible only through a series of preparatory stages, as the outcome of a whole period of transformation of bourgeois-democratic revolution into socialist revolution".

We need not here discuss the debates, mainly centered on the Chinese Revolution, which were eventually to lead to a different view of the political prospects of colonial liberation.

From 1921 the Comintern thus found itself in the difficult situation of having to work out a strategy on the assumption that further October Revolutions were not in fact likely to take place. This was awkward. As Karl Radek put it at its Fourth Congress (1922): "It is particularly difficult in a period when there are no popular revolts to pursue a Communist political policy." It was doubly awkward, since the very principles on which the International had been constructed now made it more difficult to mobilise, and co-operate with, those large sectors of the movement which it had been designed to exclude. The Comintern found itself in a position rather like an army equipped for offensive, breakthrough and pursuit, which suddenly and unexpectedly finds itself obliged to settle down to a lengthy siege.

To do it credit—and the Communist International receives little enough credit nowadays—it set about seriously rethinking its European strategy almost immediately, with the launching of the United Front policy in 1921. However, the discussions about the new strategy and the new perspectives were confused by four important factors. *First* and foremost, the hope of a European—or at least a German—October were not abandoned but only postponed; at first briefly, but after the failure of insurrection in Germany in 1923, for a longer period—perhaps until the next capitalist crisis. Alternative strategies were therefore still largely seen as something designed to fill in time until a new revolutionary crisis made a new and better-prepared October possible.

Second, opinion within the new Communist parties was divided and, on the whole, unenthusiastic. Those who had joined them had done so precisely because they wanted revolution and a total break with the old social-democratic tradition. They were ready to follow the line, but left to themselves, most of them sympathised with what was increasingly clearly a sectarian position. This was very clear in the German Communist Party.

Third, the divisions and arguments within Communist parties were unfortunately but necessarily entangled with the internal struggles and debates within the Soviet party in the 1920s. This was particularly evident in the period 1928-34, when

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a policy of almost suicidal sectarianism was imposed on the parties from Moscow. That such a policy had some support within the parties is undoubted; but I don't think it would have established itself in e.g. the British Communist Party without Moscow.

Fourth, and more defensibly, the task of turning the new Communist parties, so largely composed of former social-democrats, syndicalists or small left-wing sects, into proper Leninist parties, remained. After all, the case for Lenin's type of party (with or without its Stalinist developments or deformations) was not simply that such a party was required to make insurrection. It was required for any form of effective struggle for, and construction of, socialism.

Popular Front Strategy

So, though alternative strategies were explored within the Comintern in the 1920s, and occasionally surfaced, it was not until the 1930s that they were systematically developed. The movement had, vaguely, looked forward to the coming world crisis of capitalism as something which would somehow automatically produce a revolutionary situation. Instead it produced the most staggering and undeniable débâcle, assisted, without any doubt, by the ultra-sectarianism of the Comintern line after 1928.

In early 1933 the entire European perspective of the International lay in ruins. Hitler was in power in the country to which Lenin had once hoped soon to transfer the headquarters of international socialism, and the German CP was in exile, in concentration camps, or a hunted, illegal rump of cadres. Italian fascism felt strong enough actually to let some communists out of jail in an amnesty in 1932. The only other CP in western Europe with major support, the French, had been reduced to 28,000 members and 12 seats in Parliament. It was no longer possible to deny that the failure of the world revolution to occur in 1917-20 had been more than a temporary setback. The defeat of 1928-33 was clearly of more lasting significance, even though for another year or more officially the Comintern maintained that all was well, though with an increasingly strained air. What was more to the point, the movement was not only beaten but pursued. Fascism was advancing on all fronts. Something had to be done, if only to mobilise an effective defence.

It is not necessary here to analyse the way in which the International came to adopt the Popular Front strategy, or the elements in earlier discussions within the Communist movement which anticipated it and from which it was developed. We know that it was pioneered in France in 1934, and officially adopted by the International at its Seventh Congress—the first for seven years—in 1935, which totally reversed the former policy of seeing social-democracy as the main enemy. The new line was put forward in two powerful and visibly heartfelt reports by the new General Secretary of the International, George Dimitrov, and his assistant—also new as a spokesman for the International—Palmiro Togliatti, or, as he was then known, Ercoli.

The point I wish to make here is that the Popular Front strategy now adopted was more than a temporary defensive tactic, or even a strategy for eventually turning retreat into offensive. It was also a carefully considered strategy of advancing to socialism. It was, in my view, the first, and so far still the only, such strategy evolved for countries in which the classical insurrectionary situations of the type of the October revolution or of other types were not to be expected, though not necessarily impossible. This does not mean that it was bound to succeed. I hope to say something of its limitations and failures later. Anyway, no strategy is *bound* to succeed, though some are bound to fail. The search for the magic pill, certified by white-coated or red-flagged scientists, and absolutely guaranteed to cure cancer, cholera, rheumatism and the common cold or their political equivalents, belongs to the field of self-delusion and advertisement rather than to the field of politics.

Unity the Core

Just to remind ourselves: the core of the Popular Front strategy was unity. It was a set of concentric circles of unity: at its centre the United Front of the working-class movement, which in turn formed the basis of an even broader anti-fascist People's Front, which in turn provided in the relevant countries the base for a national front of all those determined to resist fascism in the form of the danger from Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese, and finally—even more loosely—an international front of governments and peoples—including the USSR—against fascism and war. Each of these circles had, as it were, a different degree of unity.

The object of the United Front was the reunification of labour movements split mainly between social-democratic and communists. This was quite clear in the trade union field, where the merger of separate socialist and communist (or other) unions into a single comprehensive trade union federations was envisaged—and sometimes, as in France, achieved. Mergers of socialist and communist parties into a single working-class party were not seriously envisaged in practice, since the conditions for such unity laid down by Dimitrov amounted to asking social-democratic

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parties to become communist ones by committing themselves to "the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of Soviets" and "democratic centralism" of the Bolshevik type. Nevertheless the question of the political reunification of the labour movement, "of a single political mass party of the working class" was formally declared to be urgent, and in the form of a merger of existing parties rather than of attracting the masses away from social-democracy to the communists.

The People's Fronts and the broader national fronts were to have a rather looser unity—they were in fact alliances—though, in the course of the anti-fascist struggle a more permanent unity came to be envisaged, in the form of People's Democracies or the western governments based on the unity of all anti-fascist resistance forces. The international unity was more *ad hoc* still; though once again, at the peak of the wartime alliance—but this was after the abolition of the Comintern—the Russians envisaged something like its permanent or semi-permanent prolongation into peacetime.

Strategically, the basic principle of the new policy was to:

> "find a *common language* with the broadest masses for the purposes of struggling against the class enemy, to find ways of finally overcoming *the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard* from the masses of the proletariat and all other toilers, as well as overcoming the fatal *isolation of the working class itself* from its natural allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against fascism. (Dimitrov.)

In short, the working class had been defeated because it had allowed itself to be isolated; it would win by isolating its main enemies.

Defensive and Offensive

The novelty of this strategy was to use the same weapons for defensive and offensive purposes. For the People's Front was, from the start, envisaged not simply as a necessary short-term alliance of desperation against an enemy who threatened forces which had nothing in common except the fear of this threat. This might be so, as it were, on the extreme outskirts of anti-fascist unity. Thus the British Communist Party shocked its allies in 1938 by proposing to extend its support to Churchill, just as Churchill in 1941 shocked his supporters by unhesitatingly extending it to Stalin —both on the same grounds, namely that even the devil was a good enough ally against Hitler, if he was prepared to fight him. However, governments of the anti-fascist people's front, based on working-class unity, which were the logical outcome of the policy, were from the outset also envisaged as possible elements in the transition from capitalism to socialism. The Comintern was extremely cautious and qualified in its formulations of this question, but clear enough to state that: "It may be that in a number of countries the *united front government* will prove to be one of the most important transitional forms." More generally, it was clearly stated that the fight against fascism was the main way forward in the struggle for socialism. To defeat it would also be to strike a major blow at capitalism.

The arguments for this, though not often stated with great clarity in public, were as follows. Fascism was the logical expression of monopoly-capitalism, which had reduced the effective control of the economy to a handful of ultra-powerful corporations or groups—the "two hundred families", as the French put it. These crucial groups of concentrated capitalist power, in a period of revolution and intensifying class struggle, saw their main salvation in fascism at home and abroad. As the French reactionaries put it frankly, when faced with a Popular Front government in their own country: "Better Hitler than Léon Blum." In fact, the bulk of French big business took the logical step of collaborating with the Germans, and much of private industry after the war was expropriated, not on the grounds that it was private, but on the grounds that it had so collaborated, e.g. the Renault works. Under these circumstances the call for anti-fascist struggle was in effect also the call for struggle against the most powerful, dangerous and decisive sectors of monopoly capital. It was not a struggle against the bourgeoisie as such, but, as Manuilsky argued in his survey of the Congress (*Inprecorr 1935*, p. 1,696): "Whilst we are undermining the power of these elements, we are at the same time undermining the power of the bourgeoisie as a whole, because . . . [it] is indissolubly connected with the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital."

This was excessively optimistic, for two reasons. First, because not *all* bourgeoisie, and not even all groups of monopoly capitalists, joined the fascists and thus made themselves vulnerable to attack on this ground. The Americans and the British, for one, eventually fought fascism. Second, and more seriously, because it assumed that fascism was a lasting phase of capitalist development, that bourgeois democracy was permanently abandoned as no longer compatible with capitalism, so that the defence of liberal democracy became objectively anti-capitalist. In the 1930s this was not implausible. Most of us believed it. But, as it turned out, fascism was a temporary and regional phase of world capitalism, and after 1945 it returned to a modified and bureaucratised version of liberal democracy.

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Period of Anti-Fascist Unity

However, in the 1930s and 1940s the front line between fascism and anti-fascism was indeed that of the class struggle, and the popular front strategy enabled the left to fight it with the maximum number of allies, all the more so as it was evidently defending itself, its allies, and its nations, against fascist attack. What is more, in so far as this defence was necessarily armed—as in Spain and later in World War II—it turned into a revolutionary struggle in which the communists were able to increase their influence, sometimes decisively, by virtue of their obvious effectiveness and leadership. Let us not forget that the period of the strategy of anti-fascist unity eventually led not only to something that had been hardly conceivable in Western Europe, namely armed guerrilla warfare—on a much larger scale than anything in, say, Latin America since the war—but also, and more important, to the extension of socialist power to large parts of Eastern Europe. Much of this was due to the Red Army, but by no means all. Yugoslavia, Albania, probably in a large degree Bulgaria and—until suppressed by British intervention—Greece, were genuinely home-grown liberation movements.

Moreover, from the narrower point of view of the success of Communist parties, the period of anti-fascist unity was as brilliantly successful as the 1920s had been disappointing. There was no Communist Party, however insignificant, which did not gain relatively enormous ground. I have mentioned the disastrous situation of these parties in 1933. Twelve years later, at the end of the war, the European parties were at their all-time peak, except for the German one which (in West Germany) never recovered from Hitler, and the Spanish which shared the defeat of the Republic by Franco.

In France and Italy the party was, or was on the way to becoming, the majority party of the working class for the first time. Even in countries where it had never established any support comparable to that of the socialists, its vote rose dramatically: 13 per cent in Belgium (or more than double its best previous performance), 12.5 per cent in Denmark (or more than five times its previous best), 23.5 per cent in Finland (or almost double its previous best), 10 per cent in Holland (or about three times its previous best), 12 per cent in Norway (or double its previous best), 10 per cent in Sweden (or almost double). Even in Britain, you may recall, the two communist MPs elected in 1945 mark the high point of the party's modest electoral achievement.

In one sense the period of anti-fascist unity was therefore an undoubted success. It reversed the global trend towards fascism, defeated fascism, and furthermore got the communist parties out of their sectarian isolation. If the French and Italian Communist Parties have replaced the socialist party as the major party of the working class in their countries, it was due to the experiences of the anti-fascist period. On the other hand the possible contribution of people's front governments to a transition to socialism is much more debatable.

Debate in the International Movement

There was indeed a deep, if not always acknowledged, division on this question within the Communist movement. The USSR was primarily interested in its own security—mainly against German aggression—and in diplomatic alliances to safeguard it. I think it is safe to say that it was seriously interested in people's fronts chiefly from this point of view, and not from the immediate point of view of making revolutions or the prospects of transition to socialism in other countries. Since the defeat and destruction of the USSR would have been a fatal setback to the movement everywhere, communist parties were also prepared to subordinate everything to the defence of the USSR, though this did not prevent them having plans for advancing to socialism in their own countries.

But what plans? There was a left-wing view which still believed that a return to the classical revolutionary perspective was essential. If a broad front was necessary at all—and within the Comintern Bela Kun, Lozovsky and some others were far from convinced—it should simply, as it were, get the golf-ball of revolution out of the bunker into which it had got itself by 1933, after which the game would go on as before. The people's front was at best an educational device by means of which non-communist workers could learn that revolution was the only way. In fact, the peoples' front slogan led to an enormous revitalisation and strengthening of the left, both in France and Spain. The victory of people's front governments produced a spontaneous radicalisation in the masses in both countries, which—some people argue—ought to have been used to make a bid for power in France, and which actually produced a social revolution in Spain, when Franco made his insurrection. I do not want to discuss the criticisms of communist policy which have been made about these episodes, beyond saying that I do not believe there was a revolutionary situation in France in 1936, and that in Spain the need to defeat Franco inevitably dominated the policy of the people's front government.

Policy of the Long Haul

But within the Comintern there was another

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perspective, though it was only hinted at, because those who had previously put forward such views had been damned or expelled as right-wing deviationists, e.g. George Lukacs, who was forced out of politics and into literary criticism for this reason, between 1928 and 1956. Antonio Gramsci (whose friend Togliatti was now one of the chief spokesmen of the International) had elaborated a policy based on the assumption that the lost opportunity of 1917-20 would not recur, and that communist parties must envisage not a short frontal offensive but a lengthy war of position—a policy of the long haul. In effect, they must win the leadership of a broad alliance of social forces, and *maintain* this leadership during a prolonged period of transition, in which the actual transfer of power was only one episode.

In the west communists were not confronted with a state which had only to collapse for the working class to seize power. The state was only the first line of the bourgeoisie's defence. Behind it there was a whole system of bunkers and fortresses—the institutions of civil society which established the legitimacy of bourgeois rule. Again, unlike the East—I quote Karl Radek (1922) "in the West the working masses are not so amorphous. . . . They are members of parties and they stick to their parties. In the East, in Russia, it was easier to bring them into the fold of communism after the outbreak of the revolutionary storm. In your countries it is much more difficult." Or, as Dimitrov put it in 1935:

> "It is a common mistake of a leftist character to imagine that, as soon as a political (or revolutionary) crisis arises, it is enough for the Communist leaders to throw out the slogan of revolutionary insurrection, and the masses will follow."

The struggle for hegemony over a long period implied two things: that even in the west the slogan of an immediate transition to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was correct only in exceptional circumstances, and *second*, that it was wrong for the communists to refuse to take any interest in government until after they had made their own revolution. On the contrary, the more they did so, the more they left hegemony in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and condemned themselves to subalternity.

Now in so far as the people's front governments were seen as possible régimes of transition to socialism, they therefore implied that the dictatorship of the proletariat was not the immediate programme of the communists, and that there would be an intermediate phase between the rule of the bourgeoisie and socialism. (I am not here discussing the meaning of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which has now such associations that many western communist parties are abandoning it.) But as I have tried to show above, there was a major weakness in this analysis. It made sense on the assumption that capitalism was fatally weakened by the defeat of fascism. As we have seen, this was not so. After the war it still made sense—though a bit less—on the assumption that capitalism would not recover. But as we know, it did. It made sense on the assumption that the people's front government was decisively tilted to the left, so that it could not drift back into being a bourgeois coalition with a socialist or communist appendix. But, outside Eastern Europe after the war, this was not so. On the contrary, the governments of anti-fascist unity in western Europe could get rid of their communists whenever they wished, and in any case kept them in subordinate positions, where they took the blame for unpopular government policies—e.g. as ministers of labour.

It is true that in Eastern Europe after the war—1945-47—there were genuine alliance governments, and not merely communist régimes in fancy dress, although the left wing in the Communist movement—led at the time by the Yugoslavs—regarded this as undesirable. Thus Dimitrov in 1946 said: "Our immediate task is not the realisation of socialism, but the consolidation of the democratic and parliamentary system." 'People's Democracy' then was not yet a synonym for the dictatorship of the communist party, nor was a single way of development—patterned on the USSR—imposed on the East European states. But with the coming of the cold war this ended, and little was left of the perspective of a gradual transition to socialism in accordance with conditions in each country, except the name 'People's Democracy' which was now meaningless.

Situation in which People's Fronts Arise

The criticisms of people's fronts and broad alliances by the western ultra-left envisages similar development. Such governments are rejected unless they are the immediate precursors of socialist power, i.e. unless they stop being people's fronts and turn themselves into 'dictatorships of the proletariat'. Here the present ultra-left echoes, among others, the opinions of Leon Trotsky, who dismissed the Comintern's policies in the wildest and most sectarian manner,[1] though he had earlier made some very sound criticisms of the Comintern's disastrous sectarianism before 1934. Trotsky and other ultra-radicals at the time rejected the very idea of the broad anti-fascist alliance, and

[1] He actually seems to have believed that people's fronts "doom the working class to impotence *and clear the road for fascism*" (my emphasis—E. J. H.).

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when it became clear that it stimulated a striking revival and growth of the movement, rejected it for not immediately proceeding to make a classical revolution. Recent ultra-leftist attitudes towards Chile have been along the same lines.

This was and is to misunderstand the situation in which people's fronts arise. Broad alliances of groups and parties, including people's fronts, are necessary only when the working-class party is not strong enough to win on its own: it rarely is. But when such alliances or fronts are necessary, they therefore consist of a variety of groups and organisations with very different opinions, some of them not even socialist. They are united only against a common enemy, or for a common programme which represents only the first step for some participants, whereas for others it marks the furthest point to which they are at the moment prepared to go. This follows from the fact that they are neither socially nor politically homogeneous. In short, if they are to be more than brief political interludes, the socialists within such alliances *must* convince and carry along their allies, or at least neutralise them. If they fail to do so, they simply revert to being a relatively impotent minority group. Indeed, they might even be worse off, if their policy had antagonised formerly allied, neutral or indifferent strata, allowing these to be mobilised by the class enemy.

Some Criticisms

The Italian Communist leader Berlinguer has quite rightly pointed out that this is so in countries such as ours, whether there are people's fronts or not. Even if the Italian CP were to get 51 per cent of the votes—or even a lot more—and establish a pure CP government, it would still have to carry most of the other 49 per cent with it. The Italian analysis of the tragic Chilean experience is that Allende failed not simply because his Popular Unity was unable technically to defeat the military, but because it alienated large sectors of the population which it ought to have carried with it, or at least not allowed or stimulated to become bitterly antagonistic. It thus isolated itself at the very moment of danger, and provided the military plotters with both an excuse for their coup and at least a temporary mass base of social support for it. In short, socialists must not allow themselves to forget strategy and politics—isolating the adversary, winning friends and influencing people—by falling into the trap of arithmetic—whether in the social-democratic manner by counting votes or the ultra-radical manner by counting guns. Which is not to say that either can be neglected.

Furthermore, the problem of winning political support does not disappear even when the revolutionaries are actually in effective possession of power. Portugal is a sad example of a country in which they lost a historic opportunity, partly by relying too exclusively on the backing of a military state power whose revolutionary maturity and homogeneity they overestimated, partly by the old leftist error of supposing that even in a revolutionary situation *all* the masses will automatically rally to the revolutionary slogans. They neglected the real distribution of political forces in their country—the fact that the workers and landless peasants were only a minority, the church's influence, and the ease with which the small and middle peasants of the North could be mobilised by anti-communist slogans.

This is not to say that people's front governments ought not to be criticised. They may not try to advance towards socialism at all, and therefore be no more than ordinary temporary coalitions. I think the French Popular Front of 1936 is open to this criticism. They may rely too much on being, as it were, carried in the right direction by inevitable historical forces. As suggested above, this was the weakness of the argument that the defeat of fascism must entail the decline of capitalism, or that capitalism after the war would not be able to recover its initiative and dynamism. This meant that Communists who entered such governments did not do enough to change the political structures of their countries. For instance, it may be argued that the Italian Communist Party in 1945, when it had the weight of anti-fascist insurrection behind it, neglected to destroy the structure of the old fascist bureaucracy and the political power of the Church, relying too much on a new and admittedly very progressive Constitution which they helped to draft. Again, people's fronts may be criticised for failing to appreciate the very serious problems of transforming heterogeneous and mutually suspicious coalitions or electoral alliances into effective reforming governments. This criticism can certainly be made of the Chilean Popular Unity. They may finally sometimes be criticised for not sufficiently appreciating the basic fact that government in itself is not power; that reforming governments which go too far for the ruling class may be overthrown by it, or its allies, or its foreign supporters.

The Strategy which Reaction Fears

Still, when all these criticisms have been made, the people's fronts remain to this day the socialist strategy which most frightens the enemy. They are not scared of barricades going up in Milan or Paris. On the other hand, they have always regarded unity as the main danger. Why did the Americans spend so much energy and money in the 1950s splitting the national and international trade union movements and any progressive or

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socialist party (such as the Italian) willing to co-operate with communists? Why did ideologists invent the myth that nobody could ever co-operate with communists without being swallowed by them —unless to discourage such co-operation?[2] Why that other myth, according to which no people has ever freely voted a red government into office? Why, only this spring, did the US government order its ambassador to warn every European socialist party against having anything to do with Communists? Why do Ford and Kissinger repeat daily that the entry of communists into *any* government, especially the Italian, is intolerable? Why is the Spanish government planning to legalise all parties *except* the Communist Party? Because they are afraid of the strategy of the broad alliance. They would much prefer the revolutionaries to isolate themselves, the more sectarian in spirit, the better. They know that in most countries where socialism has come, it has been brought about by broad fronts led by communists —whether in the form of people's fronts or not— rather than through the isolated action of revolutionary marxists. No war of liberation could have been won on any other terms.

It is sometimes a good thing to remind ourselves of what the enemy fears most. Today, in spite of two generations of criticism from the left, what he fears most—especially in the developed countries of Europe—is still the sort of strategy first systematically adopted by the international communist movement in the 1930s.

[2] In fact, such alliances have, as often as not, benefited the non-communists, who got rid of the communists when they had served their purpose. Communists have never regarded this as a reason for condemning all alliances on principle.

Discussion Contributions on:

Socialist Democracy: Some Problems

G. Carritt

There will certainly be members of our Communist Party, as in the Soviet Party, who will question the value to the movement of reopening discussion on the twentieth congress of the CPSU, which took place twenty years ago.

"What good does it do and who benefits by it", they ask, and they will show how the enemies of socialism make use of our exploration of these painful experiences of the revolutionary movement.

My contribution to the discussion of John Gollan's article is to give some answers to those who question thus and to suggest that the deepening of our understanding of this period is part of the renaissance of Marxism, which is beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

It is essential for a political movement which tries to guide itself by a scientific approach to make a ruthless analysis and assessment of its own history, and especially when the period of history concerned was marked by deviations and deformities of the theory and practice upheld by that movement, and when recent history has been repeatedly written to uphold the claims of different factions.

Indeed if we tried to pass over the Stalin period and silently agreed that what has already been said is satisfactory, if we did not press for further research and availability of documents, we connive in the undermining of confidence in Marxism.

Since it is common ground to adherents of Marxism, that the Stalin period was not produced by communists practising Marxism, and since the world movement was to more or less degree involved in that period and felt the consequences of it, it is the responsibility of the whole movement and not alone of the CPSU, to understand it better.

Ground Cleared for Development of Theory

The first reason justifying this discussion then, is that it clears the ground for the development of theory. The practices of the Stalin period caused grave damage in many fields of work, for example in biology, history, philosophy, literature, painting and so on. Nor was the damage confined to the development of science, ideology and art in the Soviet Union.

The whole theoretical development of the communist movement was stunted. It requires an effort of will and thought to liberate Marxism from

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dogmatism; discussion, research and the opening of archives are essential to this process.

Most important to start with is the determination to face the magnitude of what went wrong and not fear that our revelations will be exploited by the class enemy. Exploited they will be, but in the long run the truth will repay those who serve it best.

Democratic Centralism

The second reason for pursuing this discussion is that it offers us the opportunity once more to consider whether there was not and is not a predisposition in the system operated in the communist parties which goes by the name of "democratic centralism" and in the way we practice "inner party democracy" to ossify the leadership and lead to administrative methods of resolving differences and conflicts inside the party, at the expense of consultation and full democracy.

I am not saying it is so in our party, I do not think that; though in looking back on 45 years in the party I can recall distinct signs of it. Certainly if one looks around the world there are such indications.

Nor do I believe that a revolutionary party, which at some stage of its existence may face conditions of illegality, can dispense with a constitution which can provide a high degree of centralised control, and one by which in conditions of capitalist democracy it can protect itself against opportunism and corruption.

But I do believe that the transformation of the CPSU under Stalin from being the instrument of the rule of the working class into a self-perpetuating body which gave uncontrolled power to the secret police, had something to do with the organisational principles and procedures of the party.

This structure and method of operation was exported and imitated not only in the countries liberated by the Soviet army, but to a considerable degree all over the world.

The capitalist press scepticism about developments of theory in the French Party, indicate that we have been rather slow in clearing these matters up since the twentieth Congress.

In my view, the most frightening thing that happened under Stalin was that so many of the party leaders knew and allowed themselves to become accomplices in what was going on. There was terror, and many members of the Central Committee were done to death, but a very large number, and the younger they were the more, connived.

If I was asked "How do you explain that?", I would include in my explanation that if the working of inner party democracy tends to lead to the suppression of discussion, once a majority decision has been taken, and if the minority is pledged to silence, and if the membership is not and has not been involved in the differences within the leadership, then the whole apparatus of the party can very easily be put into action to treat as "bad elements" as "unreliable people" those who continue the ideological and political struggle.

There is an element of truth, a very important element, that the party which contains and tolerates difference is healthy, and a monolithic party is becoming a stone.

The answer to this question about democracy within the party does not mainly lie in rules and constitutions, but in the record of a party in its relations with the working people and in its behaviour in office. Above all in its telling of as much of the truth as can be told at all times and acceptance of the fact that it is not the depository of all wisdom.

Changing Relationship of Communist Parties

The third reason for promoting this discussion is that it will help the world communist movement to understand the changing relationship of each party to the Soviet party. This is something we tend not to discuss as if it were a taboo subject, or that it were disloyal to criticise the Soviet party.

Lecturing at the London School of Economics in 1965, Isaac Deutscher considered the consequences for Western Europe of the first socialist revolution having taken place in backward Russia.

He said:

> "The fact that the revolution first won in a backward country and the whole structure of the revolution became adjusted to its very difficult, very dangerous basis in backwardness, became a deterrent to the West."

I think this factor is still an important cause retarding socialist consciousness among the working people of Europe, and it is hitherto the failure of the Communist Parties to define their relations with the Soviet Party that fosters this misunderstanding.

Only recently a leading communist in the German Federal Republic wrote an article on "Class Consciousness" in which he never hinted at this factor. I mentioned this to a leading communist in the German Democratic Republic and he replied "Yes, maybe you're right, this is a factor, but what good does it do to bring it up; let bygones be bygones."

It is we who benefit from learning openly from our mistakes and turning them to advantage.

Readers please note

No further contributions to the discussion on "Socialist Democracy: Some Problems" will be accepted after September 30, 1976

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Cyril Claydon

It is easy for Marxists to fall into the trap of using quotations out of their context, and this is what Dorothy Friedmann has done with her reference to Marx's oft-quoted phrase: "Theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" in the February issue of *Marxism Today*.

I have always understood this to mean that Marx was speaking primarily of the role of progressive ideas which arise in the course of material and social development, inspiring members of a revolutionary class to complete the social transformation for which the material pre-requisites exist. With all the material conditions for socialism already existing in Britain, we shall be in a position to finish off capitalism once the ideas of socialism "grip" the British working class.

It is true, as Comrade Friedmann says, that reactionary ideas can "grip the masses" in some circumstances. In Britain today reactionary ideas are used by the media to divide the working people and secure their acquiescence in policies which benefit big business. This is possible because the state apparatus and the media are controlled by the capitalist class and their "establishment."

But it is surely nonsensical to argue that freedom for a small number of dissenters to express their views in writing would lead to a situation in which capitalist ideas would "grip the mass" of the Soviet people, and that therefore Soviet citizens must be protected from them in a paternalistic manner.

The Soviet people have behind them nearly 60 years experience of building socialism despite incredible difficulties. The leading political force is a Communist Party of over 15 million members; the state and the media are in the hands of the working people; and the exploitation of man by man has been abolished, thereby removing the material basis on which reactionary ideas can flourish.

Socialism would be Enriched

True, backward and traditional ideas take a long time to die, and there are bound to be contradictions within a developing socialist society which must give rise to arguments and dissatisfaction. Greater freedom for the expression of dissenting ideas would no doubt unsettle some people, for example, some students and intellectuals. But why be afraid of this? Surely Soviet Communists are capable of coping with the arguments?

Socialism would be enriched by the freer expression and clash of ideas, and it would not be a bad thing if some Soviet writers and thinkers were compelled by a challenge to their ideas to rethink some of the cruder and more dogmatic interpretations of Marxism which still tend to be in vogue in the Soviet Union.

Dorothy Friedmann defines the objectives of socialist culture as "only the development of an individual profoundly optimistic, collectivist, moral and conscious."

It is true that culture in all its forms plays an important part in the development of socialist attitudes to life, but it is much better if this process is encouraged by positive help to writers, musicians and artists rather than by laying down the law about what they should or should not do.

The Aims of Culture

Equally, it is most short-sighted to limit the "aims" of culture to social and political objectives. In so far as we mean by culture creative work in the field of literature and the arts, its function is to enrich life in many different ways which go far beyond immediate political and social objectives, however correct and necessary these may be.

Writers and artists have the complex job of reflecting reality and human aspirations in all their richness and profundity. They have to seek out fearlessly and without inhibition what is new and relevant to their generation.

They cannot do this if they are put in blinkers and obliged to plod stolidly ahead along the road towards "optimistic collectivism"—to paraphrase Dorothy Friedmann's words. The result of such an approach can only be counter-productive, and will tend to produce sterile and anaemic works of art which will make little contribution towards a genuine socialist culture.

John Tarver

With the exception of one or two articles that have appeared in translation, John Gollan's article must be judged to be the most dangerous expression of revisionism yet to hit scientific socialism in Britain in the post-war years. Not that it is an unusually bad example, far from it; the danger lies in the prominence accorded to it and the eminence of the writer.

To support this sweeping statement in 2,000 words is a daunting job. For who can agree on what revisionism is, let alone on its expression? The task is not simplified by the deceptively easy style of the article, which mingles recitals of well-known fact with apparently harmless asides and amiable suggestions, all strung together like a fishing-net with yawning holes where crucial points are omitted. Yet I fear many will be caught.

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Departures from Marxist Method

Before returning to the charge of revisionism at the end I shall therefore begin by indicating serious departures from recognised Marxist method, departures which are plainly revisionist since they substitute bourgeois methods of approach.

1) To understand the internal development of an organisation, such as the CPSU, Marxism calls for the study of its external situation and all the changes in it—what Lenin called "the totality". Bourgeois scholarship invariably tends in the direction of isolating the organisation 'in order to eliminate irrelevant material'. So does John Gollan, poring over tiny details of CPSU meetings, just glancing occasionally at Soviet society.

2) According to Marxism, men and women possess and acquire class and group interests. Bourgeois thought exalts the significance of individual personality. Here Andropov (p 24) and, it must be said, Malenkov (p 16) are more enlightening than Gollan, who actually argues that the pre-war trials of Trotskyites and others can be entirely rejected because the evil Hitler deceived the gullible Benes about the pure Tukhachevsky and alarmed the sickly suspicious Stalin.

3) New terms are introduced into Marxism with a proper analysis of their purpose. Now, however, the term 'dissent' is bandied about like an original treasure from Marx and Engels, although it is mere smugglers' trove. In the growth of bourgeois democracy the right to dissent was vital, as progress arose from objectively conflicting interests, with the new forcing the old aside. Under socialism all progress arises through collective work and discussion. The term 'dissent' loses its meaning.

What was the 20th Congress About?

Misleading the reader begins with John Gollan's opening sentence, a common device to get the key proposition swallowed. It is an utter travesty to start by describing the 20th Congress simply as the one "which exposed the crimes and mass repressions of the Stalin era."

The CPSU Central Committee described the work of the Congress in its June Resolution (p 31, lines 10-20) but instead here is what I jotted down as my enduring recollection before reaching that page: It dealt with the entire condition of Soviet and world politics, with the avoidance of war, with the needs of the Soviet people as the governing principle for the 5-Year Plan and with the restoration of Leninist standards of democracy as the outcome of overcoming the personality cult.

John Gollan plays down all the aspects of the Congress except the one he singles out (and misrepresents) in his opening. In the main, the other and positive aspects "had already emerged on the world scene" (p 4). All the 20th Congress did is dismissed by claiming "it both reflected these developments and gave them renewed impetus"—but this was of "great value" because of "the great authority of the CPSU." We are invited to believe that (among Communists under normal conditions) authority can be great without leading activity and original ideas! The truth is very different. It was above all the leading activity of the CPSU that began to change the face of the international situation from cold-and-hot war to peaceful coexistence. It was the original ideas of the CPSU that were discussed and inspired millions: outlawing wars while imperialism still survived, finding different roads to socialism, building a world socialist system, basing the planned economy and public culture on a scientific revolution.

Is this important? Yes, because Cde Gollan's argument hinges not just on concentrating attention on his chosen aspect but on considering it without references to the rest of the Congress. This is why his favourite points are actually better presented in the June Resolution, which is balanced. For example, it explains how "After Lenin's death hostile trends began gaining currency" (p 34) and goes on to describe them, whereas Gollan insists on a selective survey of Lenin's lifetime which only leaves a picture of anarchy in Party and Government. "But such was Lenin's authority and that of his closest associates that he still held the disparate elements of the leadership together" (p 7). Who is cultivating whom here?

Again (p 34), there is a frank admission that in the "complicated international and internal situation" when trying to build socialism in one country under "unimaginable difficulties" there had to be "iron discipline" and "stringent centralisation" in the USSR "which could not but have had an adverse effect on the development of some democratic forms." Gollan makes no attempt to deal with this fundamental point and thus, once his article is analysed, advances no alternative to the explanation given by the CPSU. The issue is not whether Gollan's speculations on what Lenin meant about the trade unions or bureaucracy would ever have been carried out by Lenin, but whether, in conditions quite unforeseen in Lenin's day (Hitler, Franco, rearmament, world war, cold war), the necessary discipline and centralisation could have been achieved without a cult of one man's personality and its grave consequences. I believe it could. So did and does the CPSU. That is the true lesson.

As a matter of history, the reaction of the British Party to the 20th Congress was muddled. A meandering discussion was tolerated, with unofficial journals and meetings galore. What happened at our own Congress? William Gallacher told us how nice and

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kind he had always found Stalin. A number of excuses were uttered and disquiet was recorded at the way the CPSU had handled the revelations. Only one group of delegates, led by a comrade who has since earned a justified reputation, challenged the watering down of the message of the 20th Congress.

History is Continuous

The 20th Congress of the CPSU was a necessary bridge between two stages of communist development. Plenty of water has flowed under that bridge but all John Gollan does is sit and paint part of the bridge and some of the roads that led to it.

It is useful to study the French Revolution but to understand its concepts we must actively participate in perfecting liberty, equality and brotherhood today. So it is with the 20th Congress. To understand it as well as possible we must come up-to-date with the 25th CPSU Congress. Among many relevant points, Brezhnev spoke of the operation of recommendations of the 24th Congress on the rights and duties of Soviet deputies. The results are obvious, he said, and have helped in raising and solving many problems. By dwelling not on this sort of democracy, but on whether Brezhnev sets a constitutional precedent by signing treaties, Cde Gollan turns values on their heads.

Is there then nothing new to say on the 20th Congress itself? No, I think there is. Fairly and squarely, it will be better when a scientific history of the positive and negative sides of Party life during the overall progress made under the personality cult appears in print. Of course, writing Party histories is a formidable task. Ours is proceeding at a snail's pace (although in a race I wouldn't wager my all on our entrant against the average well-bred mollusc). The Soviet comrades have steadily produced a wealth of histories, including a multi-volume Party history, comprehensive releases of decisions and documents, detailed (and diverse) accounts of the World War, etc.

The Legacy that Grows

The incredible complexity of modern life, the stunning profusion of some records, the baffling gaps in others, the influence of unstudied factors suddenly revealed by research—these reasons cause delay. Above all, however, we are looking for official history that criticises the past. This note is strongly present in Soviet writing, of course, and rests on the attainment of sound political judgments so that the real truth is known. The present state of the world communist movement and the ideological anti-Sovietism of dying imperialism are complicating factors in evaluating what was right and wrong in the choice of actions in the past.

There are other new things to be said about the 20th Congress that could not be said until years of work had confirmed and enhanced the correctness of its main conclusions. Its line on differing paths to socialism has been amply justified, accompanied by the clear need to drive home certain essential common features. Its optimism about preventing wars has proved well-founded, given joint struggle by the peace forces and the powerful socialist community of nations.

What of its view of Soviet society? This developed into the concept, theoretically new, of a state of the whole people. However, people are not uniform and will, as we near and enter communist society, become more and more truly individual. In present conditions, the fact is that some, while not forming a distinct class or group in any sense, either objectively find or subjectively feel that their personal interests do not coincide with the declared interests of society. In the course of time this problem will be overcome, because the heightened flowering of the individual will spring from a fully collective society which instils the collective determination of interests into everyone—ending the lonely road of grumbling and worse.

Nevertheless, we are living in 1976, when it would be lovely indeed if no one ever broke the law, had a mental breakdown or imagined a false picture of the West. Does John Gollan really believe that there is no "different handling of this matter" (p 25) apart from administrative measures? It is self-evident that Soviet comrades have had hundreds of hours of discussion with the people who have eventually emigrated and have found out what we only learn about them when they arrive and rarely waste their time calling on Western socialists who have defended them but make tracks for greener pastures, there to startle even hardened reactionary cold-warriors with their extraordinary opinions.

It is in all this, and much more, that the revisionism of the article is to be seen. Throughout, it substitutes bourgeois values for socialist values. We are invited to judge the USSR (and all successful socialist revolutions) from the standpoint of the educated and tolerant trade unionist or progressive, admiring plenty of points, then gasping 'But, but . . . I say . . . Is that quite the thing?' More bluntly, everything is judged from the standpoint of the social system which one-third of humanity has already superseded! Even the merit of literature "is the province of informed literary criticism" (p 23).

John Gollan exhibits a short-sighted fascination with certain rights wrested by the people in struggle with a hostile state machine. He completely fails to grasp how the socialist state is the best friend of the people. That's why we go to such trouble to capture state power! And if that state power is not effectively used, the working class and its allies fail themselves,

completed on page 207

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